July 1982 $1.75 (Canadian $2.00, UK £1.10)

KEYBOARD®

HOW TO SET UP A HOME STUDIO

THELONIOUS MONK
1917-1982

LIBRARY/PERIODICALS
UNIVERSITY OF NEW
COLLEGE AT PURCHASE
PURCHASE, NEW YORK 10577

A SPECIAL ISSUE WITH
A MONK BIOGRAPHY
TRANSCRIBED SOLOS
RARE PHOTOS
EXTENSIVE DISCOGRAPHY
TRIBUTES & REMINISCENCES
PLUS CONTRIBUTIONS BY
ORRIN KEEPNEWS
BLAKE
CK COREA
OTHERS

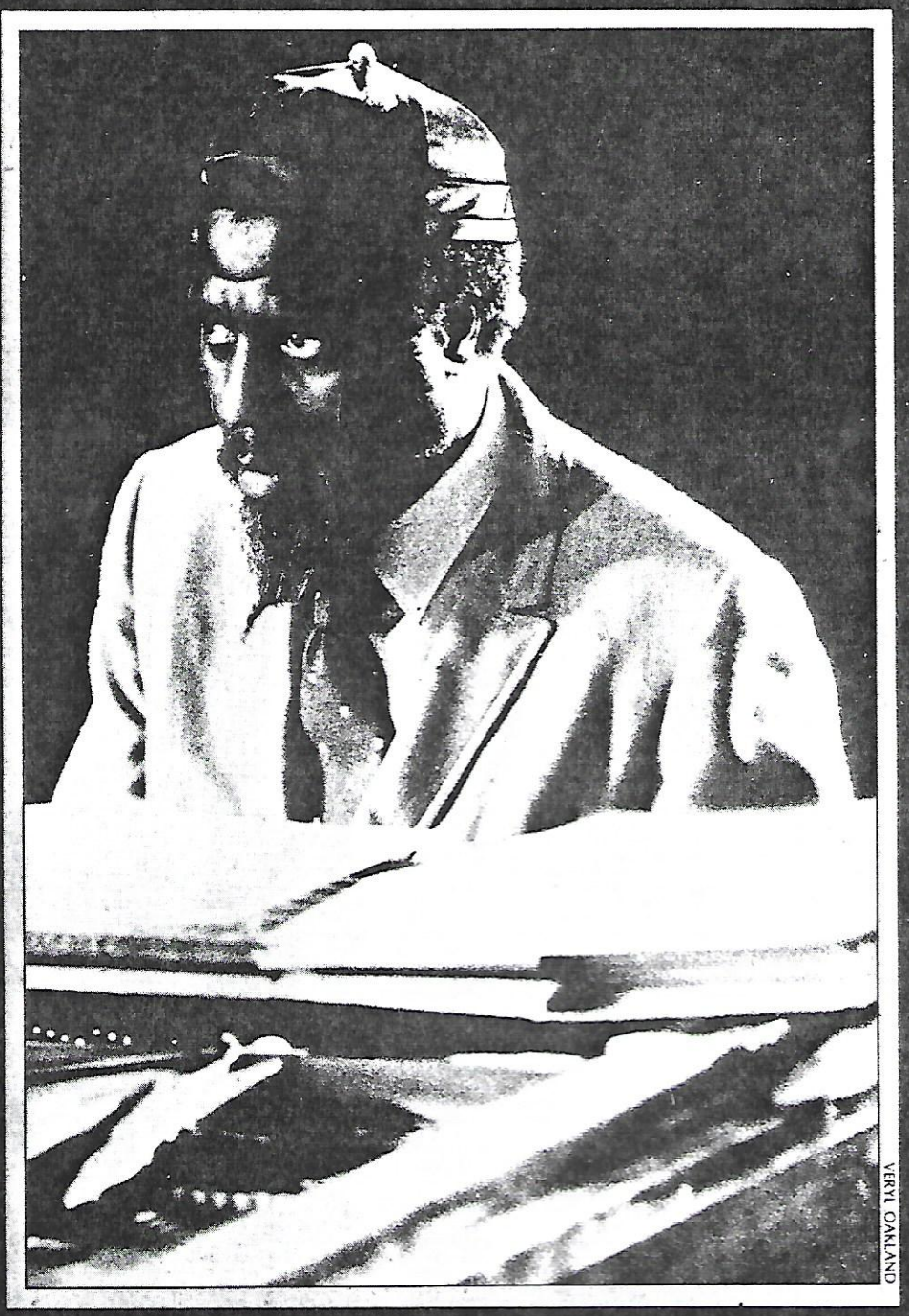
PLUS:
RUSSIAN EMIGRÉE PIANIST
BELLA DAVIDOVICH

HEAVY METAL ROCKER
DON AIREY

07
70 66788

By Bob Doerschuk

Thelonious MONK


VERYL OAKLAND

THERE WAS A TIME when Thelonious Sphere Monk was the best-kept secret in jazz. Musicians knew who he was —they didn't necessarily know what to think of him, but they knew him. The name alone was enough to fix the man in anyone's brain. Yet even after the public had memorized the hipster honor roll in the late '40s — Bird, Diz, Fats (Navarro, of course) — they only had a shadowy impression of Monk, a dark presence lurking behind the piano at Minton's, his 200-pound frame obscured by the smoke and his spare keyboard fills drowned by one apoplectic bebop horn solo after another.

Later, of course, all that changed. Not only did Monk become well-known; he became a hot property. He won the *Down Beat* Critics Poll in 1958 and '59, signalling his acceptance in the jazz establishment. He even found himself on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1964. (He had originally been slated for the Nov. 25, 1963 cover, but President Kennedy's assassination held the story up.) Now the entire country knew his name, courtesy of the Luce publishing empire.

By this time, the Monk legend had already taken root. People who would never bother to hear his music knew of his many hats, his little dances onstage, his long solitary walks, his elliptical ruminations and moody silences. Although he was finally playing concerts, even making television appearances, he was paying a price. He hadn't changed, neither to accommodate nor to spite his idolators, but in this brighter glare it was still hard to

see him for what he really was. In the eyes of the public, he remained an enigma.

And in his last days, Monk slipped back into the shadows. After only a few sporadic appearances in the '70s, he retired to the New Jersey home of his devoted longtime friend, the Baroness Nica de Koenigswarter. There he rested in solitude and silence, sinking with a slow tragic grace into the realm of legend even before his death on February 16, 1982. He was 64.

ROBERT PARENT

At the Open Door (early '50s).

From start to finish, Thelonious Monk was a private man, not given to rambling on about himself. He would rarely grant interviews, and when he did, as often as not, he would stubbornly refuse to discuss his work; to one persistent writer, he repeatedly responded, "Get the records, sit down, and dig." Clearly, in his view, the answers to any questions about music were in the music itself. One gets the impression that Monk was irritated or amused, depending on his mood at the moment, with earnest efforts to find the essence of his art in words rather than sounds.

This surely is a sign of Monk's purity as an artist. Music is at the center of most musicians' lives, but in Monk that center stretched nearly to the surface, dominating his view of the world, leaving practically everything else — excluding his ties to his wife Nellie and their family — incidental. As Charlie Rouse, who played sax for years in Monk's quartet, noted, "Monk thinks only of music." So absorbed was he in jazz that he would walk the New York streets for hours or stand still on a corner near his apartment on West 63rd Street, staring into his private landscape and running new songs and sounds through his mind. As he himself succinctly explained it, "I just walk and dig."

Certainly this kind of attitude affected his ways of communication; if music speaks for itself, what more is there to say? More subtly, though, it affected the way he played, leading him down twisting paths toward a highly individual flat-fingered system on the keyboard. Some pianists chased after the spirits of Art Tatum and, later, Bud Powell, using traditional concepts of technique as a key to unlock their own musical messages. To someone like Monk, these same old keys might seem to fit only the same old locks. To get inside new doors, a new combination had to be found.

Audiences who were used to familiar runs and chords had a lot of trouble with Monk's coalescing style in the '40s. Critic Paul Bacon was one of the few observers who could get past the general perception of Monk as an eccentric who cultivated odd habits to make up for a deficient technique. Monk "has the most expressive feeling I can find in any musician playing now," he wrote in *Down Beat*, "but it has cost Monk something to play as he does . . . 50 percent of his technique. He relies so much on absolute musical reflex that Horowitz's style might be unequal to the job."

Today there is little doubt that Monk had all the chops he needed, and more. Apparently he had the facility to follow in Tatum's rococo footsteps, but at one point he consciously decided he couldn't do so without being false to the music echoing in his mind. The late Mary Lou Williams once looked back to her first encounter with a young Thelonious: "While Monk was in Kaycee [Kansas City] he jammed every night, really used to blow on piano, employing a lot more technique than he does today. Monk plays the way he does now because he got fed up. I *know* how Monk can play. He told me he was sick of having musicians play the same thing the same way all the time."

We can look ever further back to see early signs of Monk's now familiar style. As a boy, he seated himself for hours behind the Steinway grand his family had gotten for him, practicing for hours, not just listening to the combinations he was working out on the keys, but watching the movements they produced. A mirror had been mounted on the ceiling over the piano, reflecting the rise and fall of the hammers, the shifting of the dampers, as he played. The visual balance, as well as the sounds, pleased him.

Monk's birthdate and place were for a while a matter of debate. When asked to clarify them by *Down Beat* in 1956, he replied, "When shall I be born? I'm just playing a game like everyone else." Subsequent research pinpointed the day — October 10 1917 — and place — Rocky Mount, North Carolina. He was named after his father; his mother, Barbara, was a former civil service employee, a Jehovah's Witness, and a strict disciplinarian.

Monk showed an early interest in music. A friend of the family had given them a player piano, and Thelonious was entranced at the sight of the keys magically rising and falling as the piano roll wound inside. At five or six he began picking melodies out on his own, and soon was teaching himself to read by watching over his older sister's shoulder as she took lessons.

In 1924 the Monks moved up to the San Juan Hill section of New York City near the Hudson River. Shortly after that the father, suffering from a long illness, went back down south to recover, leaving his wife to raise their three children. By now Thelonious was showing great promise. At P.S. 141, and later at Stuyvesant High School, he excelled not only in music, but in physics, math, and basketball as well. Despite his family's shallow finances, his mother did what she could to encourage his talent. She somehow managed to bring a Steinway baby grand into the house, and when Thelonious was 11 years old she began paying for weekly piano lessons. Although musical scholarships to neighborhood kids were available, and Monk's gifts were evident, the scholarship administrators anticipated puzzled jazz traditionalists of the future by deeming the child too musically unorthodox to invest in.

She also got him his first gigs, accompanying the Baptist choir in which she sang. For two years Monk played organ and piano at the church for his mother; eventually she would return the favor by attending as many of his club dates as she could. By the end of his stint there, he had picked up some solid grounding in the gospel style, which stayed with him throughout his career. Many years later, when asked to bring a new Monk composition to a recording session, he showed up with his favorite old hymn, "Abide With Me," which, he solemnly pointed out, was composed by one William H. Monk. (Interestingly, "Abide With Me" was also the favorite hymn of Fats Waller.)

But soon a new musical love made its way into Monk's life. Jazz was alive in the city streets. One of the kings of New York's piano jazz scene, James P. Johnson, lived near the Monk household, and a number of clubs were in the area too. Thelonious absorbed

this music, learned the principles of band arrangement at a local community center, and began playing with a trio at the age of 13, making his debut that summer in a New York bar and grill. At 14 he made his entrance into the rent party circuit, where solo pianists matched themselves against their competitors in festive musical combat. He also won at the Apollo Theatre's famous weekly Wednesday amateur music contests; in fact, he won so many times that he was eventually banned from the event.

But it was gospel music that first took Monk on the road as a professional musician. At age 16 he left school to travel for a little over a year with an woman evangelical faith healer and preacher; it was during a stopover with her in Kansas City that Monk and Mary Lou Williams first met. Even then, she later recalled, he was exploring new sounds on the piano, producing what she would characterize as "those frozen sounds."

On his return to New York, Monk began scuffling for work, starting with non-union jobs. It was a tough regimen; soon he was playing seven nights a week and taking home $20 for the entire week's labor. He organized his first group in 1939, after working with a band at Kelly's Stable on 52nd Street. Soon Monk landed a gig as resident pianist at a new club, but this one would prove to be more than just another jazz dungeon.

It was called Minton's, named after the owner, Henry Minton, a well-known figure on the city's music scene. Before opening this establishment, Minton had run the Rhythm Club, a popular hangout for an earlier generation of New York piano greats, including Fats Waller, Willie "the Lion" Smith, and the rest of the Harlem stride pianists. In the early '40s he appointed bandleader Teddy Hill to manage Minton's, with instructions to find a house pianist. It was on the recommendation of drummer Kenny Clarke that Hill signed Monk.

Looking back on his stint at Minton's from the vantage point of the '60s, Monk would recall, "I was just playing a gig, trying to play music. While I was at Minton's, anybody sat in if he could play. I never bothered anybody." But others remember it differently. The early '40s was a time of restless innovation. A group of young musicians who were dissatisfied with their ensemble work in swing bands began searching for new modes of expression in smaller groups, challenging their technical and creative resources in a musical language they were defining as they went along in jam sessions and discussions that stretched past the far side of midnight. According to jazz folklore, this activity centered on Minton's, and as the house pianist there, Monk was at the eye of what would become the bebop hurricane.

Our earliest recordings of Monk stem from this period. In 1941 one Jerry Newman went down to Minton's to record the great guitarist Charlie Christian. Monk appears on two of the resulting cuts: "Topsy," later retitled "Swing To Bop," and "Stompin' At The Savoy." Subsequently released in 1947 and now out of print, they show the young pianist in a state of transition, with swinging single-note runs, especially on "Savoy," mixed with rhythmic exchanges between him and drummer Kenny Clarke that definitely reach beyond the vocabulary of swing.

Bop, with its light-speed tempos, finger-breaking lines, and bizarre syncopations, was music designed for the jazz virtuoso. Much of its complexity stemmed from a conscious decision by its pioneers to come up with something so difficult to play that inferior musicians would be driven from the stage. So on afternoons before the evening sets at Minton's, Monk, Clarke, Dizzy Gillespie, trumpeter Joe Guy, and sometimes Charlie Parker would meet and sketch out a new sequence of chord changes to be unveiled that night. Much of what they came up with has been long forgotten, mainly because the tunes were being written for virtuosic display, rather than for posterity.

But some have survived, including some of Monk's first efforts at composition. More than anyone else in the Minton's crowd, Monk showed a knack for writing. This in itself set him apart from most of the other players. Years before his piano work would be taken seriously, he would be known for his composing. In fact, most of the classic Monk tunes, such as "Blue Monk," "Epistrophy," and "'Round Midnight," were written during his gig at Minton's or before 1951.

Had he never played a note at the piano, Monk would still have left his mark on jazz players everywhere through his compositions. They have been recorded exhaustively, and performed at countless jam sessions. But though he frequently wrote away from the piano while strolling through his neighborhood, his piano playing and composing are closely tied together. This becomes clear when one listens to his treatments of other people's tunes. In his various recorded versions of "Smoke Gets In Your Eyes," for instance, his improvisations are more than variations on the melody; he goes beyond that, altering the structural essence of the song by weaving his familiar minor ninths around the theme as if it had been written for that purpose.

The more one listens to Monk's records from the early bebop era, the more apparent it becomes that he stood apart from everyone else in that style. Gunther Schuller commented on this in *Jazz Review* [Nov. 1958]: "Monk was never the bopper so many people thought he was, and he was never 'cool' in the bop sense. One searches in vain for the atmosphere and clichés of the bop era . . . and one finds only Monk — original, daring, blunt, occasionally crude, and witty."

The most apparent difference, his avoidance of pyrotechnics, has already been mentioned. On another level, the Harlem stride tradition, implicitly rejected by many bop modernists, left an indelible imprint on Monk, though he seemed at times to parody the stride style or use it as a contrast to what the listener might expect. His minor ninths, voiced more frequently, starkly, and prominently than usual among bop pianists, may have stemmed, Schuller speculates, from Monk's childhood attempts to strike octaves with his smaller-than-average reach. Then there was his preoccupation with whole-tone runs, which first surfaced in four 78 rpm recordings he made in 1944 on the Joe Davis label with Coleman Hawkins, though this was a logical extension of the boppers' interest in diminished fifths.

In fact, Monk had an ambivalent attitude toward the bop style. In an interview with Nat Hentoff in the now-defunct *Nugget* magazine, he lashed out at his compatriots: "They molest! They magnify! They exaggerate!" Later, he spoke more analytically: "They don't pay enough attention to swing [*i.e.*, the beat], and that goes both for the horns and

FRANK DRIGGS COLLECTION

At the Spotlite Club, 1944 (L to R): Coleman Hawkins, Benny Harris, Don Byas, Monk, Denzil Best, Eddie Robinson.

ROBERT PARENT

At the Open Door, Sept. 6, 1953.

the rhythm section. They don't know where to put those bops." When asked what the difference was between their style and his, Monk explained, "They think differently harmonically. They play mostly stuff that's based on chords of other things, like the blues and 'I Got Rhythm.' I like the whole song, melody and chord structure, to be different. I make up my own chords and melodies."

And yet it was the more extroverted bop players who stole the spotlight in the '40s. For all the genius of Charlie Parker, the bop prototype, it proved easier to imitate his flashy intricate runs than to duplicate the mysterious substance of Monk's simple lines and chords. Bud Powell, not Monk, became the best-known pianist in that style. Ironically, Monk had helped Powell gain a foothold at Minton's, insisting he be allowed to sit in when Clarke, Gillespie, and others had no interest in him. Later Powell returned the favor by persuading the popular trumpeter and Ellington alumnus, Cootie Williams, to record "'Round Midnight." Monk had written the song at 19, yet Williams demanded equal credit as a composer before recording it, a not unusual condition in those days.

Despite his reticence to talk about personal matters — or, often, to talk at all — Monk allowed some bitterness to seep through in a 1960 interview with *Jazz* magazine. "Bud Powell? I'm the only one he *really* digs," he stated. "I brought Bud Powell around when he first started. That's never been in print. Doesn't worry me; truth got to come out some time. . . . Oscar Peterson never gives me any credit. . . . George Shearing copies *so* much jive from me. He names everybody but who he *really* digs. I don't care who *I* mention, 'cause I don't envy anybody. . . . All you read today is how Miles followed Diz, Parker, Fats Navarro around like a puppy — everybody but me. Read everything but the truth. Miles never yet mentioned how much he learned from me . . . Parker, Dizzy, they all came to hear me. Bird never excited me like he did the others. 'Bird is a god,' they said. He wasn't to me! No, and no one else was either!"

* * * *

"He's a solitary man who, when he looks back, does not see his fellow travellers — who doesn't even know if he has fellow travellers."

—*André Hodeir,* Toward Jazz

As the bop star blazed, Monk's career waned. In 1942 he played for a while with Lucky Millinder's big band, and in '44 he joined Coleman Hawkins, with whom he made his first studio recordings and went on his first extended jazz tour, playing in Chicago and on the West Coast as well as on New York's jazz club boulevard, 52nd Street.

But work began getting scarce. In 1946 he played briefly with Dizzy Gillespie's big band. The following year he made his first recording as leader of a combo, but from then through 1954 his record sessions were sporadic — two for the Blue Note label and five for Prestige. By 1948 he was only doing occasional nights at Birdland, and days were often spent sitting in his room, writing tunes, gazing silently at the television, or staring for long hours at a picture of Billie Holiday taped to his ceiling. *Down Beat* described him in 1948 as living in obscurity in his West 63rd Street flat: "Ninety percent of his time is spent at a piano — anybody's piano." But not much of that time involved getting paid. Nellie, his wife, helped keep food on the table with outside work during his periods of moody immobility.

Things weren't made any easier when, in 1951, Monk was arrested with Bud Powell on a narcotics possession charge. He spent sixty days in prison, but more crucially, the New York State Liquor Authority rescinded his cabaret card, which in those days all club performers had to have in order to work. When he got out Birdland wouldn't even offer him free admission, much less hire him. For the next several years he survived only with the Baroness de Koenigswarter's help.

Monk's fortunes didn't begin to change until the mid-'50s. In 1954 he accepted an invitation to give a series of concerts in Paris. French journalists were perplexed at his refusal to discuss his music — "Let's not talk about it," he would remonstrate gently, "let's play it" — and reviews were mixed, but it was in Paris that Monk cut his first solo piano album, *Pure Monk* [out of print].

In 1955 he began his association with the Riverside label, catching some by surprise by focusing on other people's music. His first two LPs, *Thelonious Monk Plays Duke Ellington* and *The Unique Thelonious Monk* [both out of print]. With the release of *Brilliant Corners*, a stunning collection featuring Sonny Rollins on tenor sax, in 1956, his albums began to attract more widespread attention.

Meanwhile, the Baroness and Monk's manager, a high school English teacher named Harry Colomby, got his card restored, and word began spreading that he was back in action. The mystique also grew: Program notes for the Berkshire Music Barn Jazz Concert in 1955 read, "Monk is the Greta Garbo of jazz, and his appearance at any piano is regarded as a major event by serious followers of jazz."

Monk's television debut, on the CBS *Stars Of Jazz* show in 1956, was a sign that something big was happening. A number of important jazz players shared the stage with him, but in some ways Monk, though still not widely known to the "unhip" public, was perhaps the hit of the show. During a coffee break between rehearsals, he seated himself

At the Open Door, Sept. 13, 1953 (L to R): Charles Mingus, Roy Haynes, Monk, Charlie Parker.

ROBERT PARENT

at the piano and began improvising. The other performers, including Count Basie, Billie Holiday, and saxophonist Lester Young, gathered around to listen. The scene moved the director to stage Monk's solo number with them assembled once more around the piano, the camera capturing their amazed expressions.

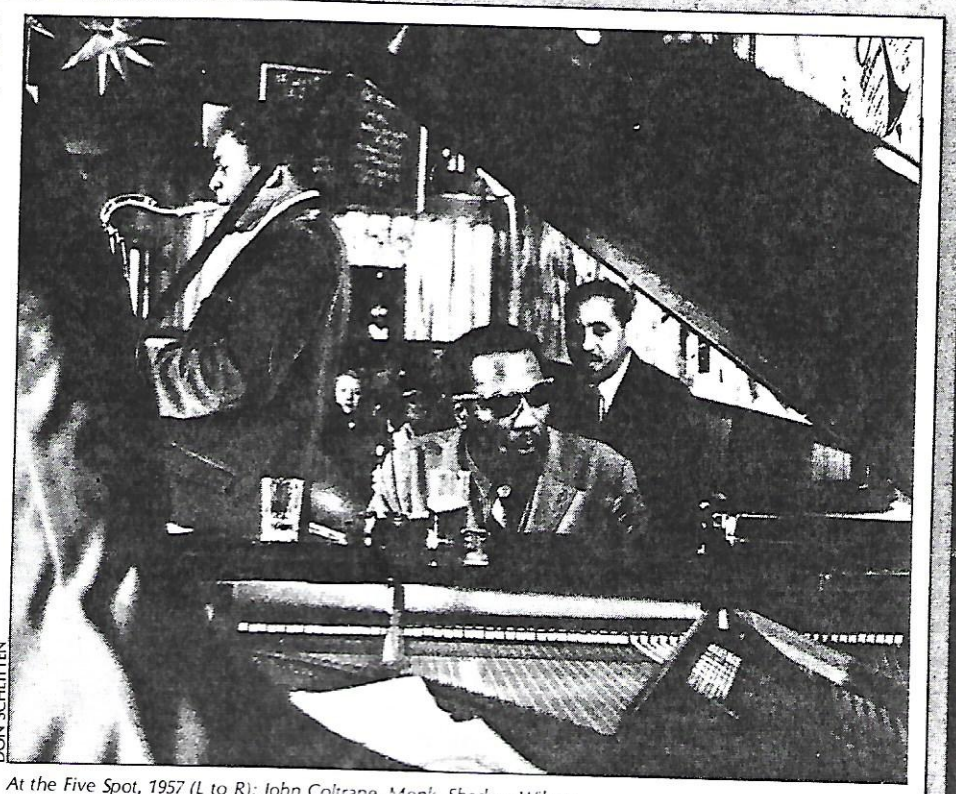
Although his TV appearance went well, it did create one peripheral problem. Three days before the telecast, Monk was scheduled to play at a recording session. He was there for each rehearsal, but when it came time to show at the studio, he was nowhere to be seen. At the last minute Mal Waldron was brought in as a substitute. It was later learned that Monk had fallen asleep; for days his anxiety over the TV gig had kept him wide awake.

His opening in the summer of 1957 at New York's Five Spot drew full houses, and the grateful management invited him to choose his own piano for the club and to stay as long as he wanted; he stayed for eight months, which was ample time, Leroi Jones noted in *Down Beat*, for him to leave his mark on the instrument, with "hundreds of scratches, even gashes, on the wood just above the keys where Monk, slashing at the keys, banged the wood with his big ring or tore it with his fingernails."

Fronting a powerful quartet there, with Shadow Wilson on drums, Wilbur Ware on bass, and a young saxophonist named John Coltrane, Monk found himself at the center of a cult. Audiences lined up to see his unpredictable performances, his quirky, quietly ecstatic dances during horn solos, his wanderings through the room. To the musically astute, however, there was much more than that going on, not the least of which being the first signs of genius in Coltrane's work. Coltrane himself laid much of the credit for his growth during this period on Monk, who, among other things, taught him how to blow more than one note at a time.

Monk's luck seemed to take one more turn for the worse in the fall of 1958, with another drug-related arrest. En route with the Baroness and Charlie Rouse from New York to Baltimore for a gig there at the Comedy Club, Monk decided to pull over for a glass of water at a hotel in Delaware. In the hotel, offended in some manner by the manager, he lapsed into a stony silence and began moving slowly back and forth through the lobby. His withering glare and massive presence frightened the manager into calling the police. By the time they arrived, Monk had gone back into the car. They ordered him to leave, but he stared quietly ahead, not moving. Finally they dragged him out, prying his grip from the steering wheel, pulling him to their van, and beating him on the hands despite the Baroness' pleas. Meanwhile, some marijuana was found in the trunk; the Baroness announced that it was hers. Charges were eventually dropped against her, but Monk was found guilty of disturbing the peace.

This was sufficient for the New York Liquor Authority to again withhold the pianist's cabaret license. Monk's manager, protesting that racism had been involved in the complaint and arrest, demanded a hearing, but when Monk refused to confirm that the hotel manager had called him a nigger, the appeal was denied.



DON SCHLITTEN

At the Five Spot, 1957 (L to R): John Coltrane, Monk, Shadow Wilson.

Monk never enjoyed being far from his wife or from New York, so when this new exclusion from the local clubs forced him to go on the road, the pressures were perhaps severe, culminating in a strange episode during a job at Storyville in Boston's Copley Square Hotel in the fall of 1959. Monk showed up late at the hotel, ambling through the lobby and staring at the walls until the unnerved management refused to give him a room. At ten that evening he seated himself at the Storyville piano, played two songs with his band, then left. At 11:30 he returned, did the same two songs, then sat motionless for about eight minutes with the band uncomfortably looking on. Sensing that they weren't needed, the group then left the stage, and Monk remained, totally still, for more than twenty more minutes before finally getting up and leaving.

Eventually he was picked up that night at the Boston airport by the state police. He had taken a cab there in hopes of catching a flight back to New York, but finding that the last planes had already departed, he started pacing up and down through the terminal. The police took him to the Grafton State Hospital in Worcester, where he was held under observation for a week. No one knew where he had gone; his wife telephoned the Boston police, not thinking to check the state force as well, and a telegram sent by the hospital to her never arrived. It wasn't until a friend in Boston heard where he was on the local news that Nellie was notified and he was released.

From that point on, when asked about his eccentricities, Monk would answer, "I can't be crazy, because they had me in one of those places and let me go."

After two years, deciding that Monk was no danger to the customers in New York, the Liquor Authority reinstated him once more, and finally he was able to play on his home turf. Most important, Nellie again would go to work with him; on rare occasions when she couldn't, he telephoned her during intermissions. Both of them believed literally that their marriage was made in heaven, or some similar department in the spiritual bureaucracy. They had first seen each other as children on a playground; though six months would pass before they actually met, both sensed a deep connection with that initial contact, and Monk would later surprise her by correctly recalling everything she was wearing that day. When she had to spend some time in a hospital, Monk composed one of his most beautiful tunes, "Crepuscule With Nellie," for her, taking a full month to get exactly the feeling he wanted with it.

Monk felt an obligation to provide for Nellie and their children, so he must have been especially grateful his increasing good fortune in the early '60s. As late as 1958 he was charging $800 for his band; by 1960 his prices had risen to as high as $2,000 for week-long jobs, or $1,000 for one-nighters, and in '64 his earnings climbed to $50,000.

And better gigs were coming in. On a European tour in the early '60s he sold out the historic Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, and his concert in Sweden was nationally televised live. He delighted in bringing back souvenirs from these tours, including new additions to his ever-growing collection of hats and a beautiful opal ring purchased in Hong Kong. Monk always wore this ring along with one he had designed himself in New York during the '50s — a black onyx

with the letters M-O, two large diamonds, and then the letters N-K.

But of all his concerts, the one staged in December '63 at New York's Philharmonic Hall may have been the most personally satisfying. Monk and his quartet — drummer Frankie Dunlop, bassist Butch Warren, and saxophonist Charlie Rouse — shared the stage with trumpeters Thad Jones and Nick Travis, saxophonists Steve Lacy, Phil Woods, and Gene Allen, and trombonist Eddie Bert in a special big-band presentation of Monk material. This was not an entirely new setting for Monk — he had fronted a ten-piece band doing Hall Overton's arrangements of his tunes at Town Hall and the Randall's Island Jazz Festival in 1959, winning enthusiastic reviews in the *New York Times* — but the Philharmonic Hall was special; it was within walking distance of his apartment, a part of the neighborhood he had criss-crossed on his long meditative strolls. After years of hassles with local clubs and unsympathetic critics, Monk had finally made it close to home.

* * * *

"Thelonious is a very strange person."
— Milt Jackson

Through feast and famine, one thing never changed — Monk himself. To the end he stuck to the technique he had begun exploring when Mary Lou Williams first heard him. Holding his fingers almost totally flat, he sacrificed accuracy in arpeggios and runs in order to get the sound he wanted, even playing with his elbows if necessary. His mood dictated his performances. After a hair-raising airplane ride to Detroit, he spent most of his concert that night jabbing the keys with his elbows for quick harsh clusters.

This elbow maneuver baffled and alienated a lot of critics and musicians, but typically their reaction made little impact on Monk. After all, he wasn't doing it to attract attention; Monk knew he was doing it for a musical purpose. As he told Valerie Wilmer, "I hit the piano with my elbow sometimes because of a certain sound I want to hear, certain chords. You can't hit that many notes with your hands. Sometimes people laugh when I'm doing that. Yeah, let 'em laugh! They need something to laugh at."

In rehearsals he could be exacting, leading his band over a one-minute segment of his music for two hours without telling them that they were practicing at a slow tempo. Since the band hadn't suffered any apprehensions about matching heavy technical demands with quick tempos, they could follow Monk's guidance up to full speed with almost no trouble once they had mastered their parts. At one rehearsal, when alto saxophonist Gigi Gryce protested that his part was impossible to play, Monk cooly replied, "You have an instrument, don't you? Either play it or throw it away," then walked off. Eventually Gryce played it.

The feeling of a piece, and its overall contours, were always more important to Monk than getting all the notes right. When saxophonist Sahib Shihab proudly announced that he would be attending classes at Juilliard, Monk responded, "Well, I hope you don't come out any worse than you sound now." Not a strong sight-reader, he rarely read scores in rehearsal, explaining, "That way, nothing distracts." He habitually gathered up the band's charts immediately after concerts and took them home, sometimes misplacing them there.

Needless to say, Monk remained personally, as well as musically, true to himself. He never moved from his apartment, a flat in the rear of an old tenement building near warehouses and public housing developments, with a tan baby grand nearly filling the main room; the keyboard almost reached the kitchen sink. His idiosyncracies remained; they were neither encouraged nor suppressed by events in the outside world. He still went on long drives in his '56 Buick or traipsed the local streets lost in music, still broke into streetcorner shuffles like a tranced-out jazz dervish. His brother recalls Thelonious whisking into his apartment one day with a collard leaf pinned to his lapel, dancing blissfully before a mirror for a few moments, then leaving without a word.

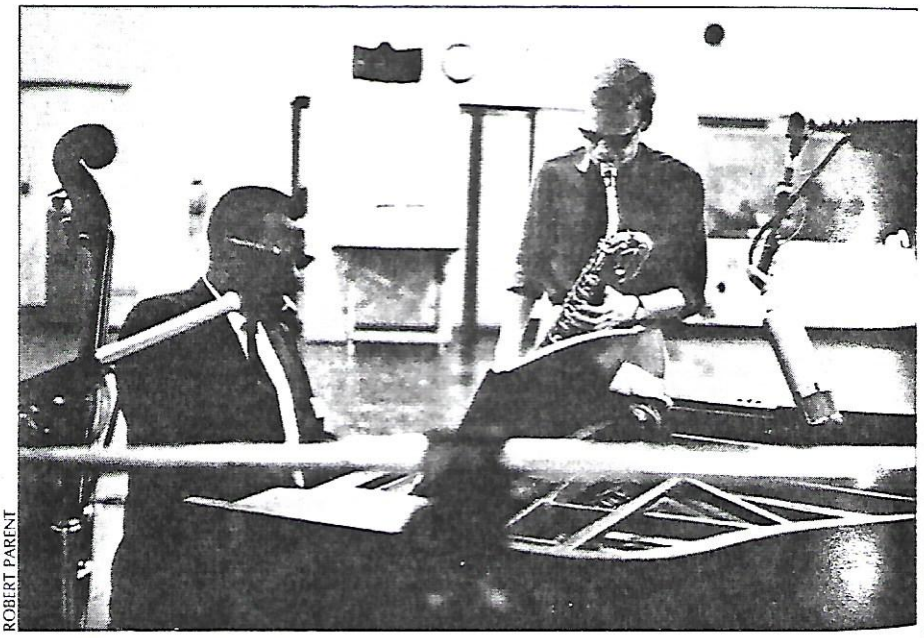
Neither did he escape his brooding quiet spells. Often he would keep his silence for days on end; strangers and loved ones alike could only watch from a distance and wait for the clouds to pass. Nat Hentoff described one club date where a waitress was sent to locate Monk, who was late for his entrance. She found him, standing absolutely still in a back room, smoking in the darkness. Few people could break through to him. Even Nellie, asking if he was worried, would sometimes only be able to get him to say, "No."

It seems likely that music, that angel spirit that beat time for his joyful tap steps, might sometimes have doubled as demon. Monk's disinterest in talking about his art may have stemmed from the presumptions of his fans nearly as much as from their earlier indifference. Imagine the scene when, at a Columbia University seminar on his music, the professor asked Monk, "Would you play some of your weird chords for the class?" The pianist bristled: "What do you mean *weird*? They're perfectly logical chords!" Then there was his record company's request for him to pose for one album cover dressed as a monk in a pulpit. He refused, but he did consent to be photographed while sitting in a little red wagon in front of his house.

There's an important point here. What may seem to the public and to exploitative industry executives as another marketable Monk eccentricity, in fact stemmed from the man's consistent view of integrity and logic. He objected to wearing a cassock because monks did not sermonize from behind church podiums, but he saw no problem with the latter shot because in reality he had composed while seated in the front yard in his son's toy wagon. Truth, in representation as well as music, was the light in Monk's life. For a man who only knew how to be true to his muse, who had never learned to compromise his art, misplaced enthusiasm may have been harder to take than the anonymity of his early career.

Monk's last years were spent at the home of the Baroness de Koenigswarter. As Orrin Keepnews and Max Roach note elsewhere in *Keyboard*, he isolated himself from people who had at one time been his closest friends and colleagues. As at every other stage of his remarkable life, we as outsiders can only speculate on what led to his withdrawal. More than most people in music, Monk must remain a mystery to us, but in his work, both as a composer and as a pianist, he has left us echoes of that hidden world inside his mind. that endless sidewalk dance, midnight dream, love, and loneliness.

"All ways know, always night, all ways know — and dig the way I say 'all ways.'"
— Thelonious Monk.



ROBERT PARENT

Recording with Gerry Mulligan, mid-'50s.

THELONIOUS MONK
A REMEMBRANCE

by Orrin Keepnews

ROBERT PARENT

L to R: Monk, Gerry Mulligan, producer Orrin Keepnews (mid-'50s).

As a jazz record producer for more than 30 years, Orrin Keepnews has worked with many of the leading figures in American music. His career has included long and productive associations with McCoy Tyner and Bill Evans as well as Thelonious Monk.

THELONIOUS MONK WAS a legend in the world of jazz for most of his career; in the world at large, he was an even vaguer figure than that. A living legend, after all, is apt to be someone who doesn't make too many public appearances; he doesn't get written about too often, and then usually in terms more of eccentricities of word and deed than of concrete accomplishments. A jazz legend, particularly a black bebop pianist and composer with an oddball name who hasn't even been seen in public in the past half-dozen years, is so far removed from reality as we know it that he doesn't even get thought about by most people.

But one of the few things you can count on in the shifting and generally unpredictable world of American music is that the death of an artist will be closely followed by a lot of printed words. This is especially true when we're left with the rather guilty feeling that his importance warranted much more noise than was made about him during his lifetime. There is really no way to avoid this and no point in complaining about it. In our times —and particularly in the several different areas that get lumped together under the heading of "popular music" — competition for public attention is so intense that to become a major focal point necessitates some really remarkable achievement: like writing a major work, or having a number one record on the charts, or winning a poll, or dying. If that's what it takes, so be it. But when it has been death that opened the floodgates of prose (which means that it's probably the last time they will be opened), it is really quite important that what is written have more than a passing association with truth and accuracy.

I am one of perhaps a handful of people who can properly claim to be somewhat expert on the elusive subject of Thelonious Monk. I first met him back at the very start of my professional involvement with jazz, in 1948 — which is so incredibly long ago that I was still several years away from producing my first album, and he had barely begun his recording career. As a result of that meeting I wrote what Monk has told me was the very first published article about him, and that magazine piece in turn was partly responsible seven years later for my becoming his producer. During the six-year period that followed, a great deal of my time and energy was poured into an intensive working relationship that resulted in thirteen albums, several of them of great importance to his career and certainly to mine and also to the overall story of contemporary jazz.

His last recording project with me was more than two decades ago, in 1960; thereafter I had little direct contact with him. In the '70s, like most people, I hardly saw or heard Monk; I had one frustrating telephone conversation with him about two years ago. However, in the years since we stopped working together I have remained constantly aware of the man and of his stature and value and influence. It is an awareness that has consistently been shared and talked about and utilized by a great many of the musicians I've been associated with during that time. Several of these men — most notably saxophonist Sonny Rollins — have shared my belief that Thelonious was in reality one of the great teachers, even though he undoubtedly never gave a formal lesson in his life. And it remains a source of pride to me to feel that I can count myself as one of his pupils.

There are many different ways of looking at Monk, and each has something to contribute to the total picture. Some of them obviously overlap; few if any are mutually exclusive. He can be thought of as a drastically unorthodox instrumentalist, composer, and bandleader (and you can choose to regard any of the three as his most important area of activity). He was a spearhead of the major musical upheaval that began in the 1940s; actually, he can be described as being among the authors of a new jazz language. As I have already noted, I am among those who consider him a significant teacher and an ongoing influence who continues even now to shape the future of jazz. And then there are those who have briefly or permanently dismissed him as a musical primitive and a naturally or deliberately flaky eccentric, much of whose work was merely an elaborate fraud.

This last description has fortunately become unfashionable by now; recent and posthumous references to his personal or musical oddities tend to treat them in a friendly way, as if he were someone's slightly peculiar uncle or an Albert Einstein-type absent-minded professor rather than a dangerous madman or the chaotic "High Priest of Bop." But in the very beginning, those last two were almost the only ways he was regarded, and it wasn't particularly friendly. Apparently it was like that even before he formally entered the jazz world; in the magazine story that emerged from my first meeting with Monk, I noted his reluctance to talk about his first solo gigs in New York "juice joints" and quoted him as saying, "There are a lot of things you can't remember — except the heckling."

The heckling — not necessarily coming only from the customers — apparently remained a factor in the feverish climate in which bebop first took shape. The first real home of this new music was a club called Minton's Playhouse, located in a side-street Harlem hotel. It opened in 1940 with a musically tolerant manager, a former big-band leader named Teddy Hill, and a house band that included Thelonious and drummer Kenny Clarke. The club soon became notable as a place where experimentally-minded musicians like Dizzy Gillespie and guitarist Charlie Christian and sometimes even Charlie Parker would come to sit in with the regulars. This was the nucleus of a group who soon found themselves to be musically linked and who began building the repertoire and structure of a new form of jazz expression. There will always be some ambiguity and room for doubt as to how much of this was free-flowing creativity, to what extent it just happened because the circumstances were right (Monk once told me, "Nobody was sitting there trying to make up

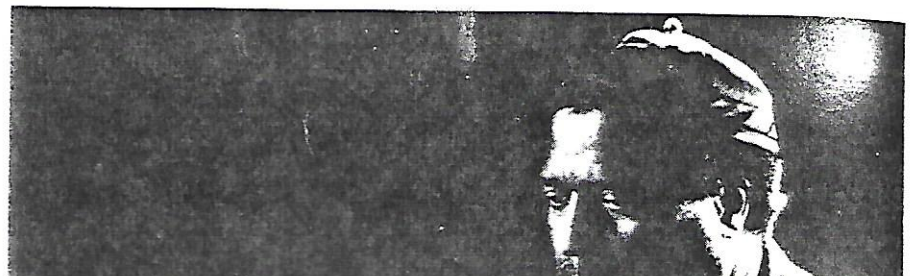
something new on purpose. Minton's was a job we were playing, that's all"), and how much was a deliberate sabotaging of what Kenny Clarke has been quoted as calling "the riff-raff" by the insiders, in order to "keep the other guys off the stand, . . . they couldn't make those chord changes."

Whatever the actual ingredients and proportions, the recipe was certainly an important one. But a bustling scene like this could not be a unified one; there was far too much creativity and personality, ego and jealousy for that. Whether his music was too different or too difficult even for this setting, or the man himself too unusual even for that free-wheeling crowd, is really not possible to say conclusively, but the fact is that Thelonious was the odd man out. He was recognized as someone different and apart, whose particular approach could not really be considered as belonging to *any* mainstream — not even the main path of the bop revolution. In the long run it has become quite clear that this off-center individualism was one of his most valuable attributes, that the intensely personal qualities Monk was to contribute to jazz were far more lasting than most of the flashy innovations of the early bebop years. But in the short run it seemed important to some people to downgrade the man.

An early example of this appears in a 1949 book by Leonard Feather entitled *Inside Bebop*. This was actually a pioneering work (aside from music magazine articles by Feather and a few others, virtually nothing analytical or even non-sensational was written on the subject in the '40s), and it is not at all my intention to scold Leonard for a three-decades-ago position he has long since reversed. But the book does provide a handy and unfortunately accurate example of how easy and commonplace it was to trash Monk in those days. *Inside Bebop* is rather breezily journalistic in tone; it includes much proper praise for Gillespie and Parker and others; and its author gives Monk the back of his hand in just two negative paragraphs that attribute (possibly correctly) to "most musicians in the bop movement" the information that his man's importance had been "grossly" overstated by "high-powered publicity." While grudgingly conceding Thelonious to be an "original thinker," Feather places most emphasis on his "lack of technique" and the news that Monk had "often fallen asleep at the piano" at Minton's. [*Ed. Note: For a more recent perspective from Feather on Monk, see* Keyboard, *May '78.*]

Part of the problem at that time actually could be traced to publicity that was rather flamboyant (although well-intentioned) and proved to be counter-productive, but could hardly be characterized as "high-powered." The publicist was the wife of the owner of Blue Note Records, then one of the first and most dedicated of the small New-York based independent labels that played such a vital role in the early growth of contemporary jazz. They had begun to record Monk, and when his first 78 rpm singles were issued in the spring of 1948, there was a campaign identifying the pianist as the "High Priest of Bop." It was a handle that quite clearly frightened away more potential record buyers than it intrigued, and it apparently gave some people a focus for their anti-Monk feelings, but the publicity effort did have, from my point of view, at least one valuable result. It led to my first encounter with Thelonious.

I had just accepted the spare-time, non-paying job of managing editor of an extremely esoteric little magazine called *The Record Changer*. Formerly a totally traditional-jazz publication, it had just been taken over by Bill Grauer (who was to be my partner when Riverside Records was formed a few years later); and Alfred Lion, the owner of Blue Note, felt we might possibly be open to some more adventurous music. So we all came together in the living room of Lion's Greenwich Village home: I was almost totally uninformed about both Monk and bebop, but in the test pressings of a tune named "Thelonious" and a few others I heard something that reached me, and with the arrogance of ignorance I proceeded on the spot to interview this already legendary, laconic eccentric.



YIRYL OAKLAND

At Monterey Jazz Festival, 1969.

As it turned out, my lack of background was an asset, and so was the fact that as a hide-bound traditional jazz fan, I had not yet heard anything attractive in the early bop records of Dizzy and Bird. My article appeared in the April 1948 issue of *The Record Changer*. it is not something I remain totally proud of; it has its factual errors and naive touches, and it consistently misspells Monk's first name by omitting the second "o" — a common enough mistake, but one I'm invariably intolerant of in others. However, not knowing in advance how I was supposed to react to Thelonious, and having previously found bop to be "frenetic, emotionless, and rhythmless," I proceeded to come up with some comments on his music that, surprisingly, I am still willing to stand behind today.

Calling his records "an outstanding example of unified small band jazz," I used phrases like "discipline and coherence," "purposeful and coordinated," and "stronger and more mature lines . . . than his Harlem contemporaries." I noted his "firm rhythmic sense" and "fertile imagination," used words like "warmth," "unity," "brilliance," and found him "capable of sly, wry, satiric humor that has a rare maturity." Most remarkably, considering how much of a beginner I know myself to have been, I wrote that "he is engaged in developing an essentially original piano style" and that in his first records "he has created a band style molded around his own ideas and shaped to his own manner of playing, much as Jelly Roll Morton and Duke Ellington did before him."

(I have long understood that the positive tone of this piece had something to do with his attitude several years later when he was approached by a fledgling record company that happened to be run by the two men who published that magazine. At that time Thelonious was recording for Prestige, another of the New York independents, but in 1955 their roster included such names as Miles Davis and the Modern Jazz Quartet, so that Monk — still classified as eccentric, musically obscure, and non-selling — was not important to them. Actually, all it took to secure his release from Prestige was the repayment of an absurdly small sum that the label had over-advanced him. I lent Monk the necessary $108.27, although Prestige did not know the source of the money, and some very important years for both Thelonious and myself lay just ahead.)

Although the thorny early relationship between Monk and some of the more 'orthodox' beboppers might have seemed at the time largely a matter of personality and temperament, it now appears clear to me that it had a great deal to do with the basic nature of his music and his creative attitudes.

CHICK COREA ON THELONIOUS MONK

Since the 1960s, Chick Corea has been an outstanding pianist, multi-keyboardist, and composer at the forefront of contemporary jazz. He is also a former columnist for Keyboard.

THERE AREN'T ENOUGH superlatives for Monk. I've been playing some of his music lately, and finding ways to integrate it into my bands. With the Griffith Park band [trumpeter Freddie Hubbard, saxophonist Joe Henderson, bassist Stanley Clarke, drummer Lenny White, and Corea], we've been playing "I Mean You" and "'Round Midnight," and I just made an album for ECM of Monk's music with Roy Haynes on drums and Miroslav Vitous on bass [currently scheduled for release in fall of '82].

Monk has always intrigued me. His music strikes me as more and more important as the years go by. He is truly *the* classic composer of jazz. Duke Ellington's music is much more hard to capture; it really needed to be expressed through Duke's own band. The players were so important for his tunes, whereas Monk's compositions stand all tests of orchestration and arrangement.

He had a very strong effect on me as a piano player too. Monk made me aware of so many things on the piano. His playing was very clear, very subtle and sophisticated, but also very simple. He always plays the melody, even when he's *not* playing the melody. He's always playing the tune that is being played. But this doesn't mean that what he played was easy. If you transcribed some of his solo piano music, you'd see that it wouldn't be that easy to play.

This brings up the old question of Monk's chops. All I have to say about that is that Monk had all the chops he needed. Chops, or the ability to move across a keyboard, is important only in relation to the music you're playing. It would be impossible to abstract Monk's technique from his music. They were one and the same thing. Whatever his music demanded, he developed a way to do it. It didn't seem to me that whatever he was unable to do at the piano was restraining his creativity. Not at all. I'm sure that if he wanted to play fast thirds in the right hand, he could have done it.

He used the rare quality of space, which is so important to any art, and he used it so strikingly, making you very aware of it. And his playing was so incredibly precise and structured. There are those who listen to it who think it's sloppy or something, but they're missing the soul of the music. He intended each note. That's the trick of playing music or doing anything, actually: Each gesture you make should be an intentional action, not just random. Monk never played random things.

He was different from the bebop piano players. It seemed to me that most of them comped mechanically, without even thinking about what they were doing any longer. They weren't *intending* the notes. They were just laying chords down as if the horn player didn't know the changes, instead of making music. Monk made music with his accompaniment, as if he had written it out. He left spaces and put things in the right places. If you sat down and wrote an orchestration, you would spend some time thinking about where to place things — it's that aspect of intention again. The next piano player whose comping struck me in a similar way was Herbie Hancock. I love the way he accompanied Miles [Davis].

I was very fortunate to see Monk play quite a bit in the '60s. In fact, when I was working with Mongo Santamaria's band, there was one stint of a week or two where we worked two or three shows together every night at the Apollo Theatre in New York. Monk was there with his quartet: Charlie Rouse on sax, Frankie Dunlop on drums, and John Ore on bass. I found a little hole in the backdrop curtain that was right by his piano, so every time he came on I just stood there totally engrossed. It was a great lesson.

He did something one night that was just crazy, but it was wonderful. He started out his set with "Rhythm-a-ning." The band ended it the usual way: piano solo, take the melody out. There was about a two-second pause, then Monk played the whole thing through again! It sounded like the first time they had ever played the tune, totally fresh and beautiful. They played it all the way through — same arrangement, same solo sequences —then ended the tune, took two or three seconds, and played "Rhythm-a-ning" a third time, all the way through again as if it was the first time. Another two- or three-second pause, then they did it a fourth time. Same tempo, same tune. The audience didn't know what was happening; they were just grooving. That was his set!

I recently went out and bought a lot of old Monk records because I had given all mine away or lost them. It's hard for me to pick out any favorites. I like them all. I heard one, though, that I hadn't heard before, a big band record on Columbia [*Monk's Blues*, CS-9806]. It's actually pretty funny. I don't like it that much, but there's one solo Monk takes on "Little Rootie Tootie" that I just love. The band plays the head in what I consider a real corny style — I would never arrange the tune that way — but then Monk jumps in and plays a piano solo that's sort of like saying to everybody in the room, "All right, *this* is 'Rootie Tootie!'"

Everything Monk did was unusual. I mean, he was an unusual guy. His whole life was unusual. I just hope that he picks up another body real quick and writes us some more music.

While it may seem strange that this iconoclast was not immediately accepted as a leader of the revolution, one reason surely was the extent to which he actually was rooted in the past. From the start, bebop was considered by its partisans as a violent and total turning away from older jazz forms, specifically a rejection of the over-arranged stagnation of big white swing bands on the one hand and the musical illiteracy of small-band traditional black jazz on the other. But there was more theory and hot-bloodedness than reality to that attitude: The most effective revolutions in the arts have always been built on adapting the past to the needs of the present, not out of thin air. Monk obviously understood this; it is evident in his music from the start. I know that on those 1947 records, strange as they sounded to me, I heard a rhythmic pulse and blues feeling that related to the jazz I was familiar with. Thelonious was clearly part of a well-defined evolutionary process. It is surely no coincidence that of the other two pianist-bandleader-composers I had referred to in my article, Jelly Roll Morton was a celebrated early eccentric who did not really fit into the jazz mainstream of his time (and was dismissed by many as overrated), and Duke Ellington always operated in a self-contained musical universe largely of his own making. Later on, at a 1957 record date, I learned that in his formative years, growing up in the West Sixties in Manhattan, Monk had listened hard to a neighborhood resident who was a magnificent stride pianist and had been the mentor of Fats Waller. We were in the control room, checking out the playback of an unaccompanied blues, and Thelonious said quietly, "I sound just like James P. Johnson," which was an exaggeration, but an incredibly apt one.

The question of technique — was he a "good" enough keyboard performer to express himself properly — never really stopped being asked, but was actually never very important. Monk was certainly far more involved with *what* he had to say than with how listeners reacted to it, with creativity rather than communication. To such an artist, orthodox technique is obviously quite secondary; if something can be expressed by use of an elbow, if it takes awkward or "wrong" fingering to produce the desired dissonance, so much the better. The brief biography in the printed program at his funeral services included a protest that "contrary to the popular rumor" he was not self-taught, but as a boy and a teenager had studied privately, played church organ, and even taken courses in "theory, harmony, and arranging" at Juilliard. Thelonious would not have appreciated the point. In a very real sense he was a "primitive," following his own rules above all else. It was neither lack of learning nor lack of ability, but a deep-seated *disregard* for normal methods, that made him proceed in such personal and often instinctive ways.

However, it is easy to appreciate that such an approach does not make for the most suitable sideman, or a sought-after colleague in group-oriented collective experimentation. From the beginning it was necessary for fellow musicians to understand that you did

Continued on page 20

DAVID REDFERN/RETNA

not easily jam with Monk, or collaborate with him; for the most part, you played his way or it didn't work. This meant that you had to care a great deal; in the early years, although men like drummer Max Roach, vibist Milt Jackson, and Art Blakey (who was the extremely effective drummer on those first Blue Note sides) do seem to have appreciated the importance of supporting and nurturing and above all accommodating this strange and remarkable talent, a lot of others did not.

Bebop came into being during a particularly stressful period in American life. It was unquestionably an expression of its times, and those involved a segue from the Great Depression of the '30s into World War II and on to the chaotic post-war years. The new jazz was pretty accurately described by clichés like "the music of a neurotic age"; its soloists were concerned almost exclusively with harmonic variations; and there was virtually no room in its repertoire for pretty ballads. Yet Monk, then as always, was primarily a melodist: his improvisations most often stayed recognizably close to the tune, and he is the composer of what has to be considered one of the most beautiful short pieces of music written in twentieth-century America, the remarkable "'Round Midnight." All in all, it really wasn't his time, which makes his degree of impact on it even more impressive.

By the mid-'50s, when I began to produce his records, things were ready for a change. Modern jazz had been around long enough to feel somewhat more secure and possibly less neurotic, and a second wave of young musicians had come along, hard on the heels of the first, but in many instances able to be a good deal more objective than the bop pioneers. To many of the newer players — Sonny Rollins and John Coltrane are the two most notable examples — the unique values of Thelonious were quickly apparent. They seemed to have no real trouble understanding his ability to combine angular dissonances with deeply emotional lyricism, his contemporary application of blues roots, his use of space and simplicity (in sharp contrast to the overflowing quantities of notes so many bebop players used to display the strength of their chops). The turnaround was swift, once it began. An attitude of respect and appreciation for Monk surfaced among younger musicians; I like to think it was aided by the fact that they could now hear him clearly and directly on a growing body of recorded work.

In the summer of 1957 Monk again became able, after a six-year lapse, to perform in New York City nightclubs. (A 60-day jail term, for an obviously minor drug bust, had made him ineligible for the then-necessary police department "cabaret card" — in those days The Man actively protected club-going adults from being entertained by ex-cons —thus seriously curtailing his public appearances.) He began with an historic half-year stand at a club called The Five Spot, with a quartet featuring John Coltrane, who was then between two other major associations with Miles Davis groups. The illustrative irony here lies in the fact that the Five Spot period, which Trane always stressed as a pivotal time in his development, came just two and a half years after a legendary Prestige record session at which Miles and Monk reportedly almost squared off after Davis ordered the pianist to lay out during a trumpet solo. That's a pretty good symbol of the changing tides, but of at least equal importance was the unqualified enthusiasm of Sonny Rollins, the first major artist to make it clear that he was a disciple of Monk. With men as highly regarded as these acknowledging his mastery (Coltrane was quoted as calling Thelonious "one of the true greats of all time" and described himself as "fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with him"), the rest of the jazz world was quick to follow. In an area to which I was very sensitive, I could note with both satisfaction and amusement the quick change in his *Down Beat* record reviews from lukewarm or less to their top 5-star rating.

I have only recently become aware of a Sonny Rollins interview in which he recalled his late '60s retirement of sorts, involving some time in India. "When I . . . found out what a real guru was — how they were treated and what they represented — I realized that Monk was my guru and it was . . . time to get back to work on what I do best." Even though Sonny may not have realized it until then, he really had been acting on that belief for many years — just as in my case, although I hadn't made the comparison before reading his remarks, it was equally true that in the late 1950s Monk had been *my* guru. In recent years Rollins and I have talked more than once about Thelonious' importance as a teacher, and it is clear that in very different ways he contributed greatly to the early shaping of both Sonny's career and mine.

For me it was initially a matter of a very tough period of on-the-job training, of apprenticing myself to a hard master. In the liner notes to only my third album with Monk, I described him as "a perfectionist . . . who drives the others as hard as he drives himself — which is possibly a little unfair of him." In writing that, I was unquestionably referring to myself as much as the players. The music was tough; the artist knew exactly what results he wanted (regardless of whether his associates considered those results to be possible); and he was as uncompromising as he was unconventional. The other musicians were driven by their own pride as well as by their feelings of respect, awe, and/or love (although not always of understanding) for this man. Such a combination inevitably led to a good deal of tension in the studio. I soon learned that it was my responsibility to relieve that condition as swiftly as possible. Looking back at that period, I realize that things were made somewhat more difficult by some of the ground rules and economic necessities of the era. For one major example, neither the time nor the money for adequate rehearsal was likely to be available; for another, it was nevertheless assumed that a jazz album could be recorded in a single day with almost everything done in one take. I eventually worked my way through to a formula that combined those incompatible elements: For the most part, I accepted the requirement of working too quickly and without rehearsal, but insisted on at least two days in the studio and as many takes as the leader and I considered necessary. It was my work with Thelonious more than anything else that helped shape this approach. It was also from sessions with him that I got my priorities straight about a number of other things.

It is possible that, as with the 19[illegible] interview, I was able to survive and succeed because I was too ignorant to be properly afraid. Perhaps, too, the fact that I really valued his music got through to Monk and helped — and over the years it has become an iron-bound law for me (one that I rarely break, and invariably regret it when I do) not to attempt to deal with a musician whose work I don't feel strongly about. I do know that I would have been in serious trouble if I had attempted an authoritarian pose in the studio, but I saw my primary role as [illegible] of a catalytic agent, providing optimum conditions for the expression of his creativity, and that attitude has worked out pretty well for me ever since. This involves a basic premise I suspect some producers have never come to understand, that in jazz (maybe not every-

Backstage at the Five Spot, 1967, with the Baroness Koenigswarter.

RAYMOND ROSS

where, but certainly in jazz) the artist is what it's all about. His music and personality are what you are trying to express, not your own, so that each one you work with may call for a different approach, a separate working relationship. Flexibility is far more valuable to a jazz producer than a specific personal style.

Being aware of the circumstances of Monk's early career made it easy enough for me to understand that he might well be carrying a very large chip on his shoulder and easily get rather testy and belligerent during a session. Among the lessons this should teach a young producer is: If the artist in the studio is feeling a draft, for whatever reason, that's your problem rather than his; you're supposed to remember that your primary goal is to produce the best possible record.

There is of course a corollary to that lesson, also Monk-taught: don't roll over and play dead either. The scheduled initial session for our fourth album, a solo date, never took place because he arrived at the studio nearly an hour and a half late (following a series of "he's on his way" phone calls). More in anger than in sorrow, I delivered a fairly pompous lecture about my need to respect myself and informing him that, while I'd accept a half-hour lateness as close enough for jazz (a timeframe I've held to ever since), he needn't bother to come any later than that because I would have left. We set a new date; I arrived about fifteen minutes early; and there in the control room sat Thelonious, waiting for me. He gave me that huge slow smile of his and asked, very quietly: "What kept you?" It was an extremely successful session.

Life with Monk was not often very relaxed, but once I had — with his help — gotten through my apprenticeship and become a well-schooled professional, it was a lot less tense. Having survived his basic training, having become aware that severe crises, last-minute major adjustments, and personality clashes are the routine facts of recording life, I could never be frightened by any musician or shaken up by any in-studio problem. I like to think that my overall attitude and philosophy is fundamentally a product of my own instincts, intellect, and taste. But that is certainly part of what Sonny Rollins meant by choosing the term "guru" rather than simply "teacher" — much of Monk's special magic lay in the fact that you could gain from him whatever you most needed to enhance what was already at least potentially there. Sonny, for example, clearly found reinforcement of his own belief in the importance of humor in his music. And in the course of developing from a young player often accused of harsh and unemotional tone into a mature master of the art of balladry, he surely had absorbed a basic Monk message on how to add beauty and lyricism without losing toughness.

In a 1960 *Down Beat* article in which Coltrane refers to the time he spent with Thelonious, there is an extremely appropriate reference to Monk's uniquely oblique way of imparting knowledge without actually appearing to instruct. "I felt I learned from him in every way — through the senses, theoreti-

Continued on page 22

THELONIOUS MONK
TRIBUTES FROM COLLEAGUES

PIANO PLAYERS WEREN'T the only musicians whose work was affected by Thelonious Monk. Drummers, bassists, and horn players, especially those privileged to work with Monk, also felt his impact, sometimes after just one or two hearings.

What is most peculiar about Monk's legacy is the generally accepted idea that he established no specific school of piano playing. Unlike Earl Hines, Art Tatum, and Bud Powell, to name three influential masters of jazz piano, Monk had no keyboard disciples, yet he may have left his mark along a broader plane than any other pianist in jazz history. Both Hines and Powell, for example, transposed contemporary approaches to horn improvisation onto the keyboard; their contribution, then, was to apply something that was already happening elsewhere to the piano. And because of his complex polyphony, Tatum had almost no influence on horn and rhythm players.

But all jazz players could hear something in Monk's work that had meaning for them, no matter what their instrument. To prove our point, we offer the following recollections and comments from some of today's jazz greats. Those who were pianists listened intently to his work. Those who played other instruments performed and recorded with him. And all have first-hand observations about the lessons he left for the jazz players of today and tomorrow.

* * * *

MAX ROACH
(Drums)

Like Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, Monk gave the drummer space by virtue of the fact that he was a built-in rhythm section of his own, and that left the drummer free not just to be responsible for keeping time, but also to add color. Monk encouraged me to emancipate the drums from their subservient role as just timekeepers. He knew how to compose within the rhythm section by using the bass and drums in conjunction with himself, rather than just behind him.

Sometimes I heard horn players say he dropped chords in at odd places. A lot of horn players like to hear the chord on the first beat so they can play off of it. But Monk would create a rhythm pattern within which the chord didn't necessarily have to fall on that first beat. He would build a sequence of phrases into a rhythmic design that allowed the rhythm section to create a sound unto itself. This kind of freedom means the rhythm players had to play with the harmonic progression in their heads too, rather than being subservient to the first beat, and that gives the piece more artistic substance.

I last spoke to Monk just after Miles Davis had decided to come out of retirement. I was up at the CBS office, and everybody was talking about how wonderful it would be if Thelonious Monk would start playing again too. They asked me to sound him out, so I called him around the fall of last year. Since we hadn't spoken in so long, he was delighted to hear from me, but when we got past the social amenities, and I said, "You know, Monk, I was thinking about coming out to say hello and pay you a visit," he said to me, "I don't think that would be advisable." I think he suspected that there was a reason for me calling him, and he was right — it was to say that one of the executives at CBS wanted to make some kind of overture. That was the last time I spoke with him.

GERRY MULLIGAN
(Baritone sax)

Monk and I didn't play together very much, but we were close neighbors on the West Side in New York, so we saw each other just about every day, and we did spend a lot of time talking. That's why his record company asked us to do an album together [*Mulligan Meets Monk*]. He was very supportive in the way he accompanied me, but I wish we'd played together more before that, because it took some getting used to his approach. I liked the eccentricities in his progressions and his way of dealing with rhythms. He didn't explain very much; he would make his point musically and assume that everybody had enough wit to follow where he went. If they didn't, it was hard luck.

It's very difficult for me to separate Monk the piano player from Monk the composer. His piano playing was a direct expression of his attitude toward composition. In both areas he had a unique sense of how to use space, and I think that's how he had an effect on all of us.

McCOY TYNER
(Piano)

Monk was one of my major influences on the piano. I had a special reason for liking his playing: He wasn't excessive in terms of overcomping, and everything he played made sense to me. His playing was interesting because of how he spaced his intervals. It wouldn't always be a whole bunch of notes. Sometimes it'd be three, or even two, notes, but they were always just the *right* notes. *Sound* is what Monk produced. He wasn't a college graduate; he had his own school, and that was sound. Monk always liked the bass to be heard; that was very important to him. He never wanted the drums to cover up the bass player. His compositions were also intriguing, but very logical in the way they moved. He'd have four chords to each bar

Continued on page 23

cally, technically. I would talk to Monk about musical problems, and he would sit at the piano and show me the answers just by playing them. I could watch him play and find out the things I wanted to know. Also, I could see a lot of things that I didn't know about at all."

One important aspect of Monk's special approach to his music was the specific value he seemed to place on each individual musician he was involved with. He was a tough and demanding bandleader, but he rarely seemed to regard those who worked for him as merely amorphous sidemen. As I had surmised the first time I heard him, he integrated the functions of composer, leader, and pianist in a manner quite comparable to Ellington's. He thought of the band's sound as being created by individuals, not just by instruments, so that you could not accurately say that when Coltrane left he was *replaced* by Johnny Griffin. The fact that Griffin was a very different kind of tenor saxophone player was not only obvious to Thelonious, it was something for him to utilize: That kind of change in personnel meant that even without changes in repertoire the material he played would be altered, rearranged, made new. This is an essential but often undervalued element in improvisatory music. It involves a lot more than just trying to play a different solo than you did last time; it means being able to approach the same specific melody or set of chord changes in a variety of ways under changing circumstances. Thelonious was a master of this; since he concentrated largely on his own compositions and didn't really write all that many pieces, tracing his recorded repertoire from its Blue Note beginnings through Prestige, Riverside, and Columbia turns up a whole array of fascinating examples of how the passage of time and changes in instrumentation or in key personnel would lead to major reinterpretations of "Off Minor" or "Well, You Needn't" or "Monk's Mood" or (time and time again) "'Round Midnight." And it helped that his taste in sidemen was generally excellent. I know that I learned to pay close attention to his spoken or implied recommendations; among the players I either first heard or first *really* heard through Monk were Rollins, Coltrane, Griffin, Blakey, trumpeter Clark Terry, trumpeter/bandleader Thad Jones, bassist Wilbur Ware, and saxophonist Charlie Rouse — and I've probably omitted more than a few.

It should be noted that while Monk himself enjoyed feeling free to reshape and newly interpret his own writing, not too many other musicians have really been able to indulge in quite the same luxury. Playing his tunes is, at best, hard work. Thelonious was a remarkable composer, but his material can be basically divided into two categories: difficult and impossible. Only "'Round Midnight," which seems as simple as any pop melody, has had widespread acceptance — and even that richly lyrical ballad is wickedly deceptive. Its apparent simplicity masks some tricky undercurrents; compared to any Monk recording of it, any *other* version probably cheats a little here and goes astray a bit there — and most people play the incorrect release that Miles Davis resorted to when he recorded it. In the difficult category are selections like those mentioned in the preceding paragraph and just a few more ("I Mean You," "Straight, No Chaser") that can be handled by strong musicians willing to give themselves a strenuous workout. Then there are the impossible ones: compositions I sometimes suspect he wrote as a form of nose-thumbing revenge on those who claimed he was devoid of technique, which I have seen drive normally unflappable master players straight up the walls of recording studios. Try your hand at, say, "Brilliant Corners" or "Jackie-ing" and you'll wind up feeling even more in awe of this man.

RAYMOND ROSS

At the 1966 Newport Jazz Festival, with Charlie Rouse.

I am aware that I have, often enough, referred to Thelonious as "eccentric," but I don't feel I have done much of a job of documenting that claim. The problem is that his eccentricity was entirely natural and authentic. In no way was it a pose; consequently, he rarely did or said overtly 'funny' things. Never doubt that he was an original, a man who in many different ways danced only to his own rhythm and adhered only to his own standards. But so many of the anecdotes I remember most vividly turn out, on reexamination, to have been incisive and appropriate rather than merely amusing. His already-noted reference to sounding like James P. Johnson, for one; or the advice he gave Clark Terry while rehearsing a tune at a record date. "Don't pay any attention to what I'm playing behind you now," he recommended, "because when we record I might play something completely different and it'll just confuse you."

However, weird circumstances did have a habit of happening around him. One evening in the studio, he asked to have the piano moved just a few feet to give him better eye contact with the other musicians, a quite reasonable request. The engineer and a couple of bystanders hastened to oblige — and one front leg of a perfectly normal Steinway managed to collapse. Then there is an incident that I've always treasured as a measure of both what could go wrong and how he could save the day. While we were recording a 1959 concert, using only one tape machine set up just off-stage, Monk either forgot or disdained to check with me, as pre-arranged, at the end of a number. As a result, he began the next selection while we were still changing reels, losing for us a sizeable chunk of the opening chorus. Made aware of his error, he informed the audience that "the engineers loused up" and proceeded to repeat, as an encore, the otherwise-incomplete tune!

By 1961, there was enough world-wide

appreciation of Thelonious to make him attractive to a major label; his advisors moved him upward to Columbia, and our working association came to an end. My admiration for the man remained, but there was very little opportunity for direct contact. I don't feel immodest in saying that our years together included high points in his recording career that were never again approached: We had experimented with groups of various sizes and had combined Monk with some very major colleagues (Coltrane, Rollins, Gerry Mulligan, Coleman Hawkins); for whatever reasons, almost all his subsequent recorded work was with his regular working quartet. By the mid-1970s, of course, he had completed a gradual total and permanent withdrawal from activity. I have no expert knowledge at all of his last years, but it would seem to involve physical illness and deterioration, which certainly must have added to his always-present degree of emotional detachment from the world at large.

My last words with Monk came almost two years ago. While on a trip to New York, I had a sudden impulse to telephone him; the conversation ran approximately like this:

"Thelonious, are you touching the piano at all these days?"

"No, I'm not."

"Do you want to get back to playing?"

"No, I don't."

"I'm only in town for a few days; would you like me to come and visit, talk about the old days?"

"No, I wouldn't."

When I repeated this to Barry Harris, the pianist who was much closer to him than almost anyone else in the last years, he said: "You're lucky. You got complete sentences. With most people he just says, 'No.'"

If I were to make a guess, I'd conclude that he may just have worn down and stopped caring, that the roller-coaster aspects of being a performing artist in our times had finally taken its toll. From an early '60s peak that even saw his picture on the cover of *Time* magazine, this once-obscure pianist had slid back towards obscurity. To someone who had never really cared all that much about communicating with the public, it couldn't have seemed worth the effort to start climbing again. Towards the end he reportedly had ignored or rejected some very fancy offers from would-be promoters of comeback concerts. I hope those reports are accurate; I would like to think that he simply felt he had said all he cared to say to any of us.

The legacy he left remains very much in evidence: his recordings and compositions, the work of those he influenced in various ways. He taught quite a few people, directly and indirectly, some very important lessons: to play the way you feel you have to, to be intolerant of musical (and other) conventions and dogma, not to compromise — admonitions that are, for most of us, impossible to follow completely. But even to add a little of his approach to your music or life can be valuable. Thelonious Monk was a very unusual human being and extremely good at what he did. I'm glad that I was able to know him and work with him.

sometimes, and he expected you to hear each one when you played through them.

Monk seemed to want to keep a distance between himself and certain people, but I saw him as a very sensitive and very good person. Once I was playing opposite him, and I told him, "Monk, I really love you, because what you do is so beautiful." And he said, "Coming from you, I believe it."

SONNY ROLLINS
(Tenor Sax)

The first time I heard Monk was when he was playing on a record with my idol, [tenor saxophonist] Coleman Hawkins. He had a very distinct sound, which I thought was great. There was something there. The first time I played with him was when I was in high school. I was in a band with a friend of mine, a trumpet player named Lowell Lewis, who was rehearsing with Monk at that time. He took me over to Monk's house, and eventually I got a gig with him.

As a rule, he would bring in some very intricate music. I remember people looking at it and saying, "This is impossible. We can't do this," but by the time rehearsal was over everyone was playing it.

I never really thought about or analyzed his piano style, except in that I liked what he was doing. He was such a personality, and his music was so unique, that I liked him, and that was it. I do remember his placement of chords. If you put a chord in a certain place, it can seem like you're in there a lot, or it can seem like you're not in there at all. That's one thing I liked about his style.

I'm very happy to say that Monk had a lot of respect for me as a musician, which was wonderful. It gave me the incentive to keep on playing even though I had a lot of self-doubts. He wouldn't really give me a lot of instructions, other than to just show me the music. He usually would accept whatever interpretation I put on it. On the other hand, we were playing Monk's music, and that was very definite. You couldn't get too free, because as Coltrane said one time, if you miss a change with Monk, you feel like you've suddenly stepped into an empty elevator shaft. You couldn't get too far from his sound or intention.

HORACE SILVER
(Piano)

I first heard Monk play on his early Blue Note records. I was going out with a girl who was into jazz. She had a record collection, including some stuff by Monk, who I'd never heard of. She played one of them for me, and my first reaction was, this guy is putting everyone on. He can't be serious. It was so different that I couldn't get with it. Eventually I began to realize that he was serious, and I started to listen with more respect. Soon I realized just what a great master musician and stylist he was.

By the time I saw him live, I was knocked out. Of course, he was fun to watch too, because he had mannerisms while he was playing that were kind of humorous. He just did what he wanted, and the hell with what people thought. He did his thing, and his thing was so radical that people looked at him like he was crazy or some sort of nut. Even today, you wonder how a man could be so daring and different. He didn't seem to connect to any pianists of the past. It seemed like he just dropped out of the blue!

PHIL WOODS
(Alto Sax)

I only played with Monk when he appeared with a big band in the early '60s, but I can tell you he was a magician. Hall Overton actually rehearsed the band, but we could always tell when we were getting the music right when Monk would start dancing! He knew exactly what he wanted.

Monk's songs were so pianistic. I remember somebody asking him how he did his bent notes at the piano, and he said he didn't bend them, he used curved pitch! Hall's charts had some tricky stuff, especially when you got into things like the last three choruses of "Little Rootie Tootie," which were just a verbatim transcription of what Monk played as a piano solo.

Before I saw the alto parts I borrowed all of Hall's piano transcriptions; I was very curious about Monk's music, as everybody was, and I found that the best way to get into it was to go right to the keyboard and find out what these voicings were. You couldn't call them chords, but you had to find the prevalent tones in them. You could still call something a *G minor*, but you found that there was an *A* and an *F#* in it you had to home in on.

At the concerts, Monk was at the piano, sticking to you like glue and prodding and pulling you into areas that you didn't think you were capable of reaching, especially with his bizarre percussive little clusters. He triggered whole different areas for improvisation. You found yourself coming up with licks you didn't knew resided in you.

There's a big to-do about his music now that he's dead, but it's still going to take a while for his genius to hit, it's so off-the-wall. His technique was so bizarre, I don't think it would be possible to affect many pianists. In fact, I'm hoping it won't; I can't imagine it working for anyone else. On his whole-tone runs, for example, he'd go *C, D, E,* then move his left hand up to the *F#*. He'd cross in the damnedest spots. He'd give you a Liberace on the whole-tone run, but he wouldn't exactly play it; he'd sort of place his fingers and roll in a stiff, curved position.

Essentially I think he freed up the piano player in a comping role. He had the terrific left-hand stride if he wanted it. He was a master of space, and he would spread his harmony out over a tenth or twelfth, beyond the old 1-3-5-7. He would play something up high, then do a funny note on the bottom; put it all together, and it would just spell Monk.

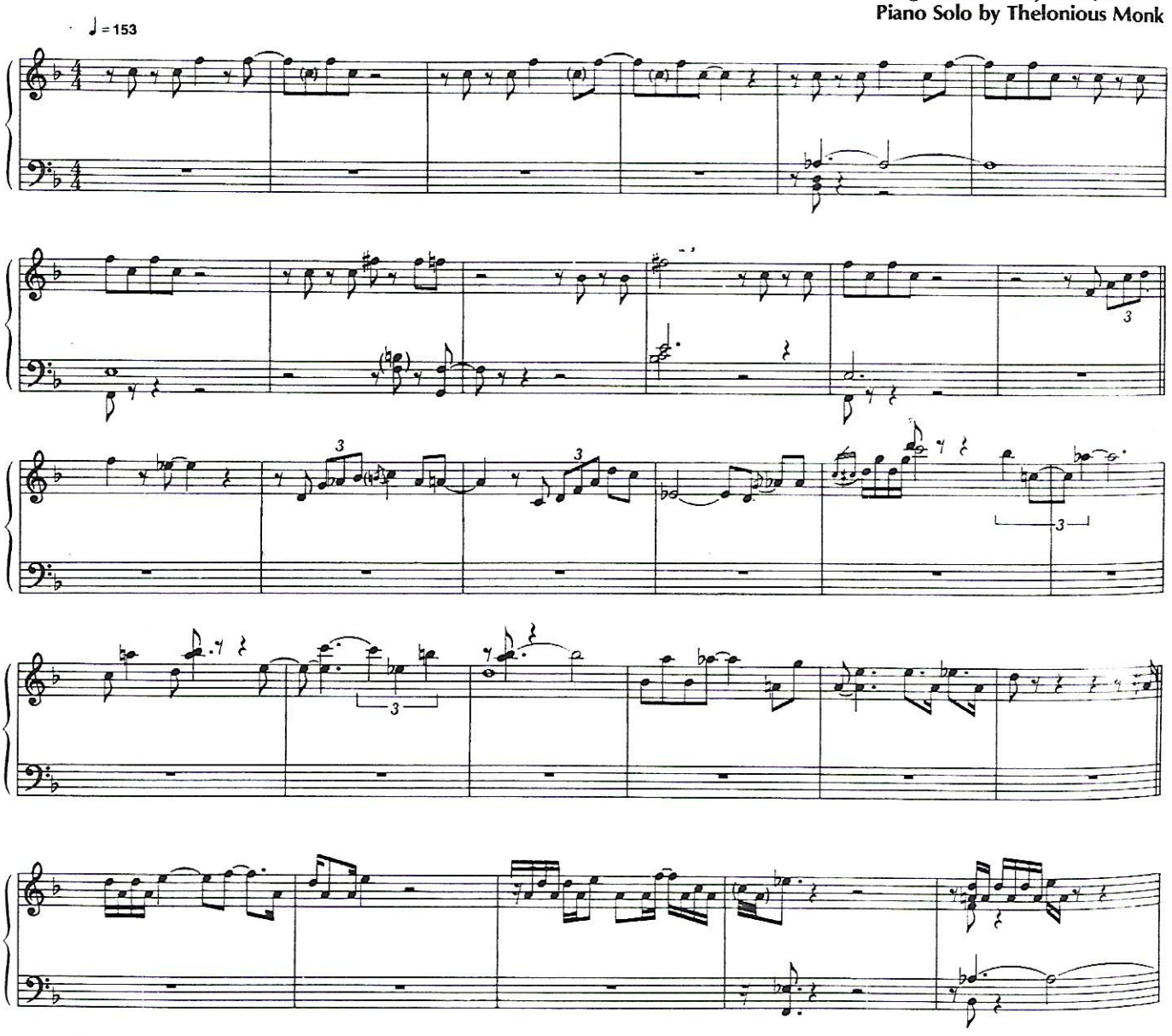
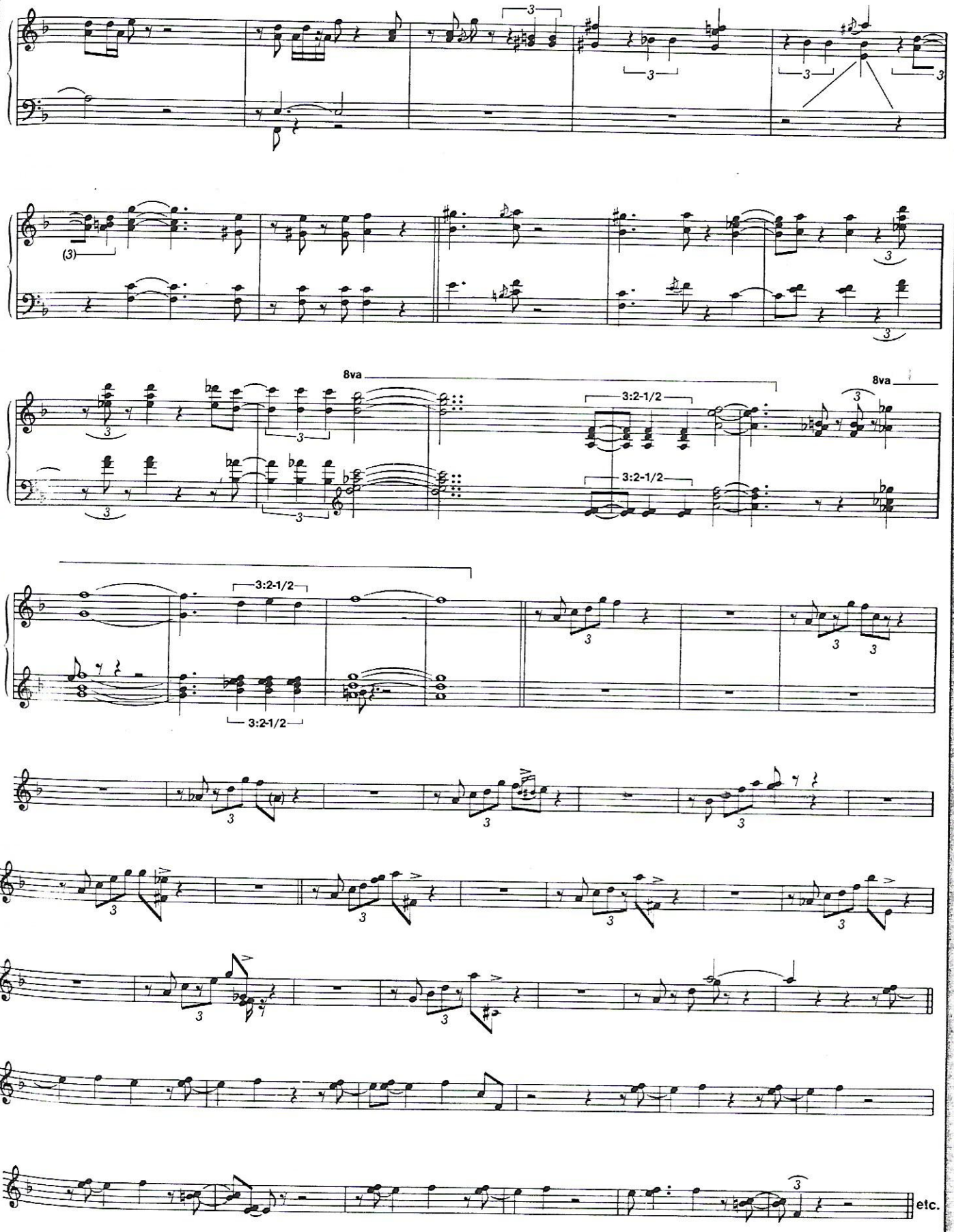
MONK'S SOLO ON "BAGS' GROOVE"

LAWRENCE SHUSTAK

SCHOLARS AND FANS COULD argue for years about which of the millions of recorded jazz solos belong in the category of classic performances, without ever reaching agreement on a definitive list. But it's safe to say that Thelonious Monk's improvisation on "Bags' Groove" would be a strong candidate for inclusion. The tune is a 12-bar blues penned by Milt "Bags" Jackson, and it made its first appearance on a Miles Davis quintet session recorded on Dec. 24, 1954. In addition to Davis on trumpet, Jackson on vibes, and Monk on piano, the group included Percy Heath on bass and Kenny Clarke on drums. There was some tension between Miles and Monk on the date; reportedly, Miles told Monk not to comp at all behind the trumpet solos. The fact that Monk was sitting at the piano storing up energy (or fuming, if you choose to look at it that way) may have had something to do with the brilliant conciseness of his playing, not only on "Bags' Groove" but on "The Man I Love" (see page 26), recorded the same day.

For an analysis of the solo shown below, please consult Ran Blake's article beginning on page 26.

— Jim Aikin

"Bags' Groove" by Milt Jackson
Piano Solo by Thelonious Monk

"Bags' Groove" © 1958 Wemar Music. Used by permission.

8va
8va
3:2-1/2
3:2-1/2
3:2-1/2
3:2-1/2
etc.

THE MONK PIANO STYLE

by Ran Blake

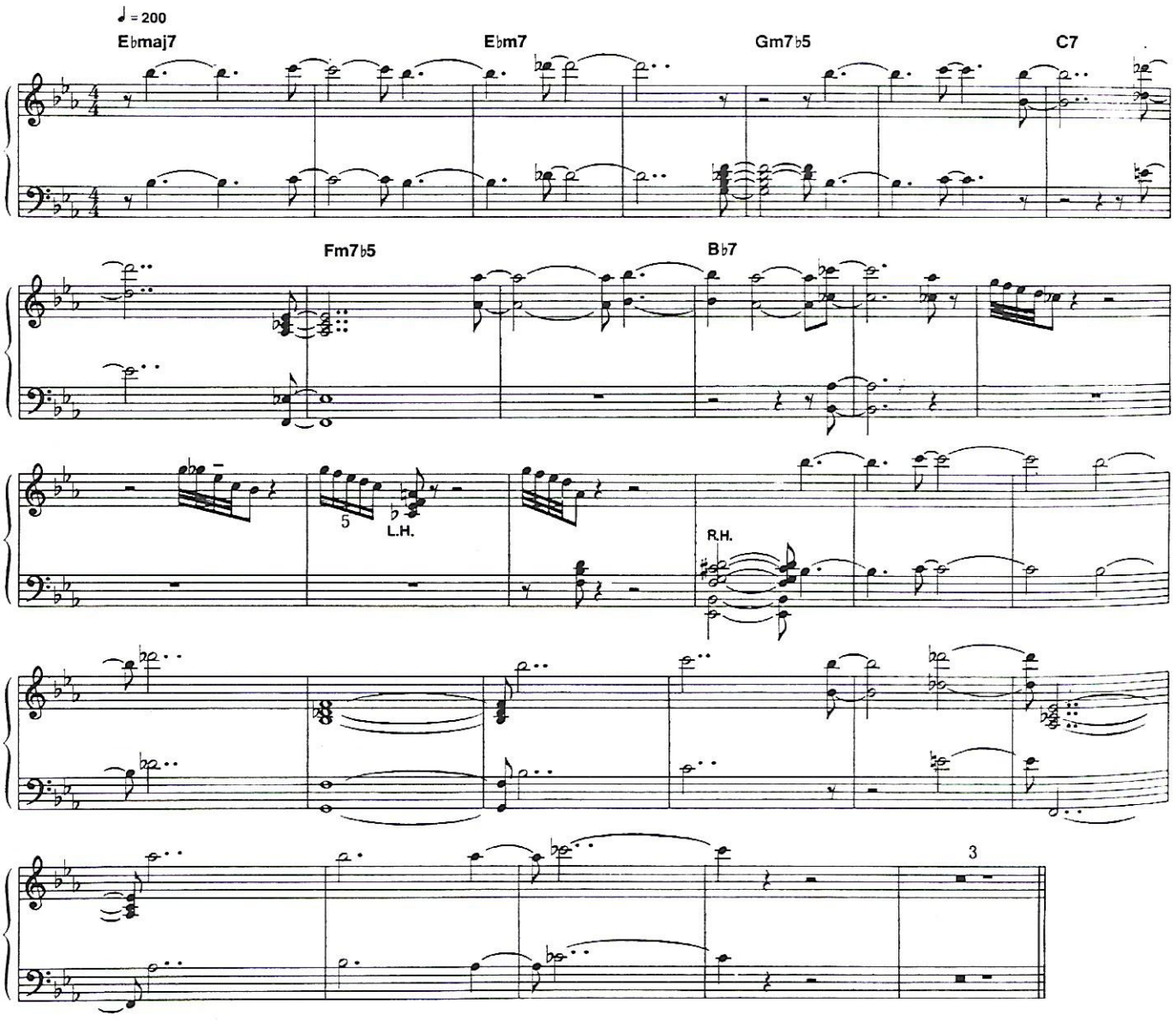
In addition to being a dedicated Monk fan, Ran Blake teaches contemporary jazz at the New England Conservatory. His group and solo piano albums have appeared on Arista and several European labels.

GIANTS ABOUND in the history of American improvised piano, which is studded with the talents of innovators and consolidators. In addition to such acknowledged masters as Jelly Roll Morton, Fats Waller, Earl Hines, and, of course, Art Tatum, I would include Count Basie for his rhythmic drive and sparseness, Bill Evans for his highly innovative linear improvisations, and dozens of other vitally important figures.

But I know of no pianist as personal as Thelonious Monk. As with Ben Webster's sax playing and Billie Holiday's singing, there is never any doubt who is at the keyboard. It may be a delayed attack on a chord, a cluster that pounces like a tornado, or a jagged snippet that asserts itself under a number of guises. Monk's methods of reworking the raw material of a tune are unlike anybody else's.

Pianists and other musicians can gain a great deal by studying and considering Monk's sense of melodic connections between chords when comping behind a soloist, his use of the melody of a composition as the *cantus firmus* to be referred to constantly during a solo in place of the more common practice of creating new melodies that outline the chord changes, and above all, his magnificent use of space. These are a few of the important elements of Thelonious Monk's piano style. His approach to the keyboard was a radical departure from what had gone before, and he unquestionably qualifies as one of the great jazz innovators, though fewer people were prepared to adopt the Monk vocabulary than learned and repeated Charlie Parker's virtuoso licks. In addition, Monk's respect for tradition, especially the strangely refracted blues feeling that pervades much of his work, qualifies him as a consolidator of what had gone before. Some musicians have discarded the old to arrive at the new, while others have made their main contribution by distilling and perfecting the contributions of others. Monk did both.

Monk's solos are superb examples of what I call "liquid composition." He always seemed to be aware, when playing a solo, of where he had been and where he was going, and he almost never resorted to spinning out

Ex. 1. Monk's solo on "The Man I Love."

"The Man I Love" © 1924 (renewed) New World Music Corp. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

TRANSCRIPTIONS BY JIM AIKIN

lead lines merely to be filling space. When he felt that he had nothing to say, Monk was quite willing to let the space remain empty.

On one memorable occasion, when recording Gershwin's "The Man I Love" on a session with Miles Davis, Monk played the 'A' section of his solo extremely sparsely, using almost nothing but the basic melodic figure of the tune (see Ex. 1). This was more striking than it looks on the page, because the rhythm section was playing a double-time beat in relation to the chord changes, while Monk went the opposite direction and played the melody in half-time, so that each note was sustained twice as long as would be expected. Still, it was the 'B' section that was uniquely Monk. In the 'B' section he played nothing at all, leaving the bass and drums to fend for themselves. Apparently (judging from the recording), this silence was too much for Miles, who after a few bars played a little bugle call to wake up the piano player! *[Ed. Note: There were two takes of "The Man I Love," both of which are found on the twelve-record box set* Miles Davis Chronicle: The Complete Prestige Recordings *(out of print). The version of the 'A' section shown in Ex. 1 is from take one, but it was on take two that Monk laid out on the 'B' section.]*

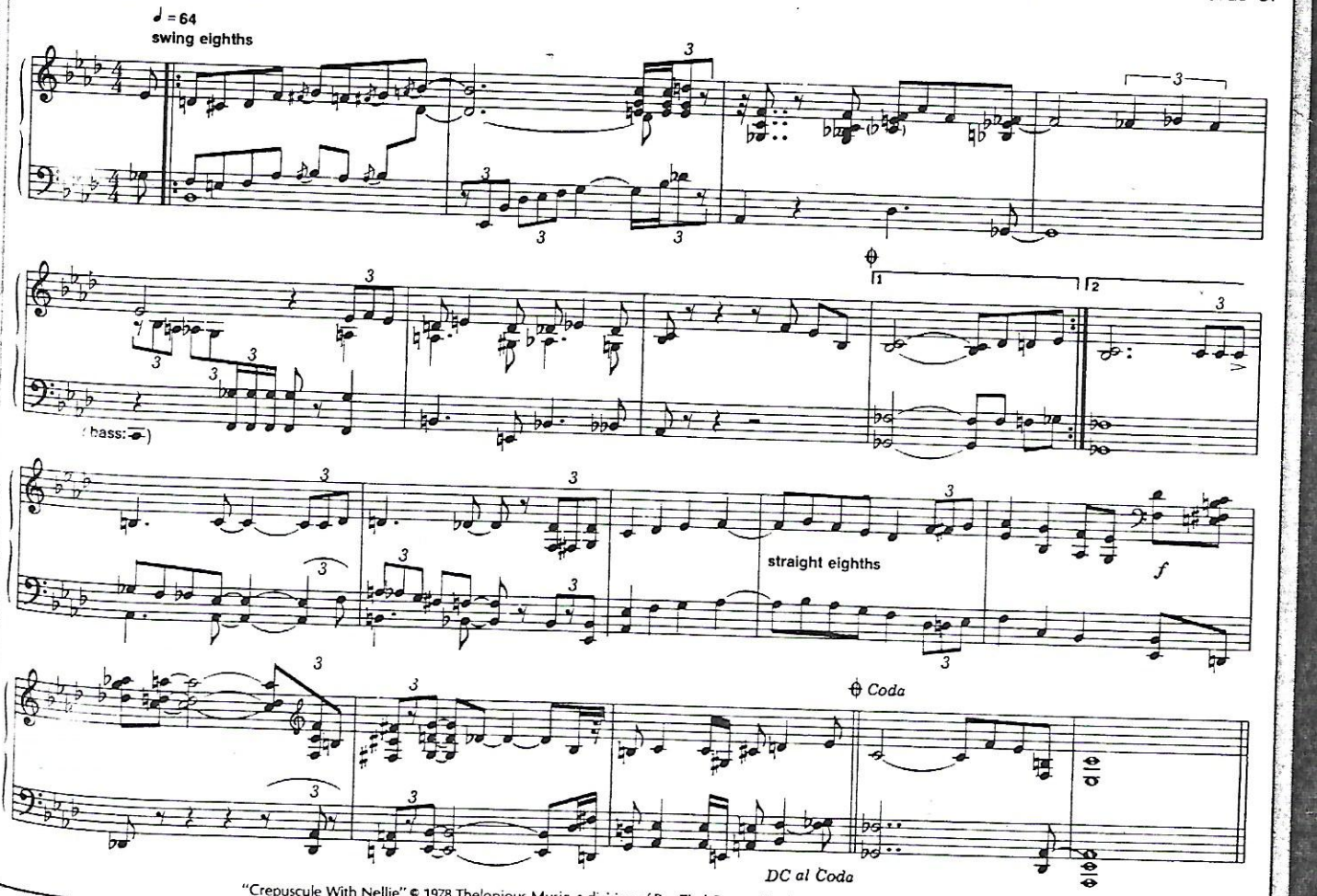
Jazz writer Whitney Balliet offers another perspective: "His [Monk's] improvisations were molten Monk compositions, and his compositions were frozen Monk improvisations." This is an important perception, emphasizing the essential unity of everything Monk did. But it is also true that his compositions were concise, tightly structured gems, in which to alter one note would be to change the shape of the whole. His solos were more laconic and often more deeply emotional, though there are certainly tunes like "'Round Midnight" and "Crepuscule With Nellie" (see Ex. 2) that showed Monk's lyrical side, while solos like the superb blues "Bags' Groove" (see page 24), which will be discussed in more detail below, are as tightly constructed and brilliantly developed as any composition.

Since Monk had a habit of re-recording compositions he had written and recorded years before, it is sometimes possible to see the principles of economy in his composition at work. In the 1951 Blue Note version of "Criss Cross"(see Ex. 3), for example, Monk presents the theme completely, with a repeating eight-bar 'A' section, an eight-bar 'B' section, and a reprise of the 'A' section. But in the early 1960s Columbia version of the same tune, he omits the last two bars of the bridge, transforming the structure drastically. Since the 'B' section contains a three-bar phrase that is repeated, followed by a two-bar tag phrase, omitting the tag phrase emphasizes the asymmetry of the three-bar phrases and gives the return of the 'A' section an unexpected jump.

There are many aspects of Monk's music that merit discussion. I'd like to talk about his compositions, his rhythmic and harmonic ingenuity, and his improvisations, and also give examples of his pianistic technique and his roots in the Harlem stride piano tradition in which he grew up.

Let's start with technique. How often have you heard musicians say, "Monk writes good tunes, but he can't play the piano"? This is a common misconception, but his recordings frequently contain short keyboard passages that are actually a great deal harder to play than they sound. Consider his solo piano recording of "Eronel." At the beginning of the first solo chorus, and again at the beginning of the second (see Ex. 4), he plays a trill with the thumb and index finger of his right hand while his fourth and fifth fingers articulate the accented melody notes. The left hand is also playing some low chords, so there is no question that the right hand is doing both parts. This feat of pianism certainly merits the term 'virtuosity,' and a little listening is enough to detect other instances of similar technical precision.

To those who aren't familiar with jazz keyboard work in general, Monk often sounds clumsy or deficient in technique because of his predilection for split notes (minor or major seconds played simultaneously as though they were a single note). This is a standard jazz technique, used to provide variety of articulation in a line, but it's true that Monk used more split notes than almost any other jazz pianist. When we look at *how* he uses them, however, we find that they were clearly intentional, and not the result of sloppy fingering. The seventh chorus of

Ex. 2. "Crepuscule With Nellie."

"Crepuscule With Nellie" © 1978 Thelonious Music, a division of Bar-Thel Corp. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

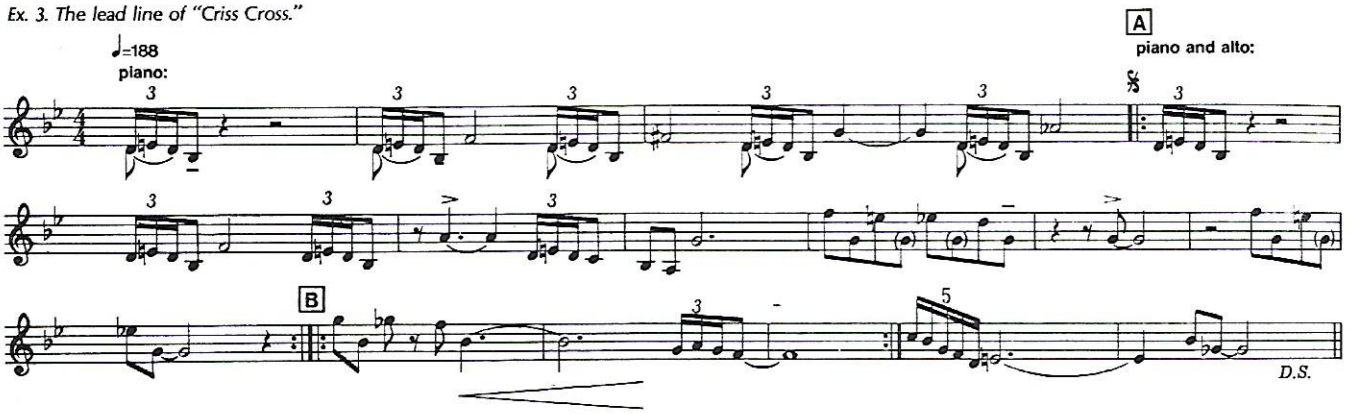
"Bag's Groove," for example, is built entirely on the idea of hitting a minor second and then letting one of the two keys up. Elsewhere, as in "Hornin' In" (see Ex. 5), Monk composes a unison line for the horns and then doubles it on the keyboard in major seconds, playing both the horn notes and the notes above them.

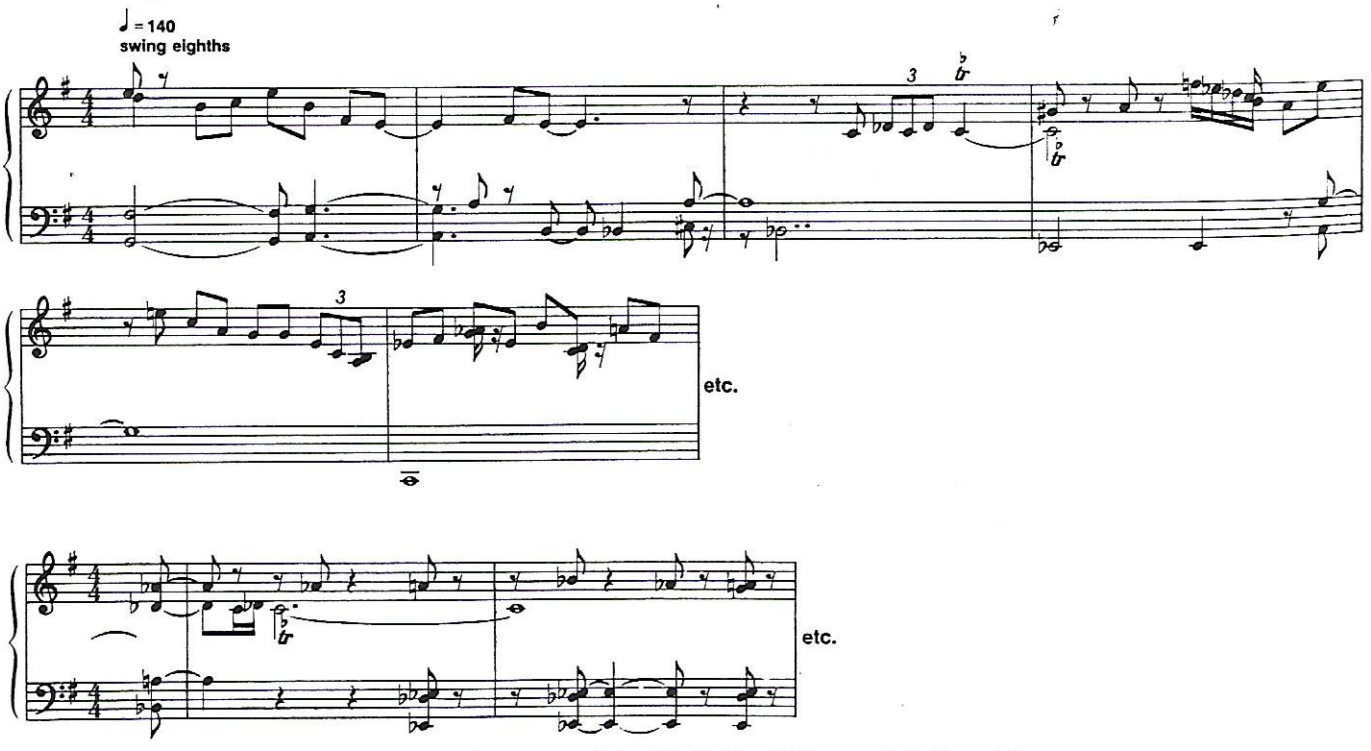
Several piano players, notably Earl Hines and Bud Powell, borrowed the kind of lines played by horn players (Louis Armstrong and other trumpeters in the case of Hines, and Charlie Parker in the case of Powell) and adapted them to the keyboard. But Monk's idiom was both intensely personal and intensely *pianistic*. It's hard to imagine much of his music being conceived for or executed on any instrument other than the piano. You can sometimes hear the horn players he worked with struggling to play his music, because it's *not* horn music. And in learning Monk tunes for a memorial concert we did recently, I was amazed to find how well they fit under my fingers.

We can also discover, once in a great while, Monk acknowledging his debt to stride piano. In his solo in "Thelonious," for example (see Ex. 6), after a first chorus that consists mostly of a high B♭ octave played over and over, Monk abruptly launches into a stride statement of the changes, with a typically laconic Monk phrase in the right hand. With the possible exception of the left-hand chord on the fourth beat of bar 8 of the example, which doesn't seem to fit with the C♭7 harmony of the third beat, there is certainly nothing in this passage that could be called sloppy or technically deficient.

Turning to Monk the composer, we find different tunes revealing different facets of his thinking. His well-known predilection for whole-tone scales, and their associated flat-5th and sharp-5th chords, was a way of organizing pitch material that, carried to its logical conclusion, allowed him to develop a high degree of harmonic ambiguity while retaining the familiar jazz cycle-of-fifths feel. In other words, since there are only two whole-tone scales, it's possible to write music that sounds as though it is following a cycling chord progression by merely shifting back and forth from one scale to the other, without clarifying where the roots of the chords are.

A clear example of this is seen in "Hornin' In," a rarely played Monk composition and one I believe he only recorded once. The transcription shows the entire orchestration (except for drums) of the first run-through of the 'A' section. What is remarkable about this tune is that until the cadence arrives in bar 7, there is nothing to tell the listener what key the tune is in. The familiar II-V progressions are absent (though when bar 7 arrives, we can look back and see that the tenor was playing the 3rd of a II in bar 5 and the 7th of a V in bar 6). Instead, Monk uses the E♭ whole-tone scale for the first two bars, then dodges away to the other (outlined by the E and B♭ in bar 3). Bars 3 and 4 especially are in a twilight zone at the border of tonality; the tenor is implying some sort of harmonic movement,

Ex. 3. The lead line of "Criss Cross."

"Criss Cross" © 1962 Thelonious Music, a division of Bar-Thel Corp. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

Ex. 4. Two excerpts from "Eronel."

"Eronel" © 1962 Thelonious Music, a division of Bar-Thel Corp. All rights reserved. Used by permission

but we are unable to say what the chords would be.

For the ears of musicians who were steeped in the swift melodies of Bird and the blues of Mahalia Jackson in the early '50s, this was entirely new, even shocking. While composers working in the European concert music tradition had been experimenting with diffuse tonality or even atonality for several decades, jazz had remained a firmly tonal music. Along with a few other pioneers like Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn, Lennie Tristano, Richard Twardzik, and George Russell, Monk was responsible for loosening the grip of tonality and thus paving the way for the later free jazz experiments of Ornette Coleman and others.

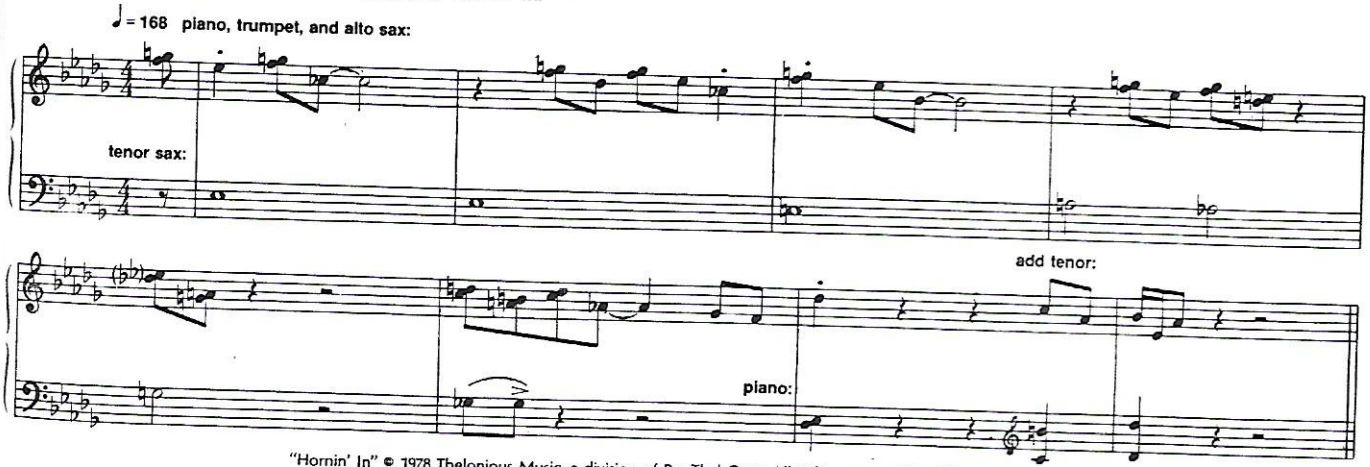
In the mid-'50s, having severed his connections with Blue Note Records and later Prestige Records, Monk began recording with the sympathetic support of Orrin Keepnews of Riverside Records. In this fertile period he composed three of his finest compositions, "Brilliant Corners," "Pannonica," and "Crepuscule With Nellie," as well as such catchy tunes as "Jackie-ing" and "Worry Now Later." "Pannonica" is dedicated to the legendary Baroness Pannonica Koenigswarter, who inspired a number of other compositions by Monk and a great many other musicians (a partial list would include "Nica's Dream" by Horace Silver, "Nica's Tempo" by saxophonist Gigi Gryce, "Blues For Nica" by Kenny Drew, "Tonica" by trumpeter Kenny Dorham, "Nica" by Sonny Clark, and "Nica Steps Out" by Freddie Redd). "Pannonica," which incidentally marked Monk's debut on celeste, is a composition that haunts; its granite beauty has a devastating impact on listeners, even those not fully convinced by Monk. The melody of "Brilliant Corners" stalks around a circular path. Shifts in tempo and Sonny Rollins' fine sax solo add to Monk's uncompromising mood.

In addition to the Baroness, Nellie Monk was a great source of strength to her husband. "Crepuscule With Nellie," written while she was recuperating from an illness, may be Monk's most harmonically rich composition (see Ex. 2); the parallel sixths in bar 1, which set the mood, are certainly not a typical Monk device. Here again, however, he creates harmonic ambiguity by starting on a II major chord, not even introducing the flat 7th for a couple of beats. The dissonant interjection at the end of bar 2 is probably something that only Monk could have thought of. At first glance it seems foreign to the rest of the tune, but in fact it provides the vital spur that keeps listeners on the edges of their seats.

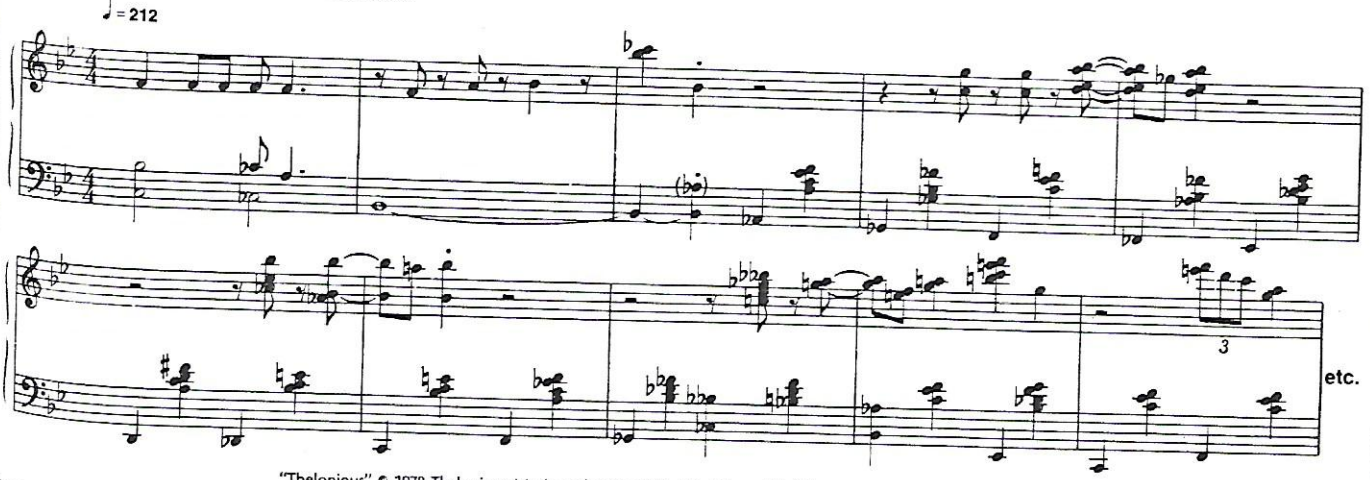
Monk composed a large library of music, making it difficult to single out any one composition over the others, but many fans agree that "Criss Cross" (Ex. 3) is among his best. I particularly like the second note in the figure, which gives a Lydian quality to the melody. But the harmonic structure is less important here; what is striking is the rhythm of the melody. In his four-bar intro, Monk sets up a three-beat pattern that crosses the bar lines, with stressed long notes that form a rising chromatic scale. Beginning at the repeat sign (the actual beginning of the 32-bar structure of the tune), the piano and alto seem to be merely repeating what Monk has already played — but with an exquisite sense of timing, Monk dodges away in bar 7, first leaving an unexpected hole with the eighth-rest and then jumping up past the high point of the previous line (the A♭ in bar 4) to an A♮. A new figure is introduced in bar 12, its descending chromatic scale perfectly mirroring the rising chromatic scale in the first four bars.

The stark economy and clarity of organization of Monk's improvised soloing are plainly audible in just about everything he recorded, but "Bags' Groove" (see page 24) may be an especially good example of the Monk genius at work. This is a standard 12-bar blues, and instead of referring directly to the melody of the head, Monk creates his own "molten composition." In the first chorus, he introduces a simple two-note idea and plays with it for a while, finally expanding the interval of a fourth to an augmented fifth to create a momentary dissonance with the F♯ before resolving back to the two notes with which he started. In the second chorus a

Ex. 5. Ensemble orchestration on the 'A' section of "Hornin' In."



"Hornin' In" © 1978 Thelonious Music, a division of Bar-Thel Corp. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

Ex. 6. A portion of Monk's solo on "Thelonious."

"Thelonious" © 1978 Thelonious Music, a division of Bar-Thel Corp. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

more 'melodic' figure appears, but after only a few bars he abandons it in favor of a series of sixths and sevenths in laconic syncopations. At the end of the chorus, however, these larger intervals collapse back to a fourth, making it clear that Monk was only continuing the development of his first idea.

The fourth is also the basis of the next chorus, but here it is played in sixteenth-notes as a sort of tremolo, as the music becomes more agitated. The upper notes in this section, the *D, E, F,* and *E♭*, outline a melodic idea, and Monk quickly abandons the sixteenth-notes in favor of this more powerful element, combining it with the upward interval leaps from the previous chorus in a series of more dissonant and more rhythmically staggered fragments. At the end of this chorus he returns to earth momentarily with a tag phrase that is almost corny. What redeems it is that it serves as the springboard for the block chord chorus, which is the most abstruse material in the whole solo. Notice how the block chords elaborate the rhythmic idea of the preceding tag phrase, twisting it around and taking it in unexpected directions.

Having emerged triumphant from this jungle of dissonant voicings, Monk returns to the triplet figure he abandoned in the second chorus. At first this seems to be a whimsical little idea, but the downward leaps at the ends of the phrases become more and more bizarre, while the rigid use of rests between phrases creates mounting suspense. In these two choruses also we can see how Monk deliberately omits selected notes in the triplet figures. The ear of the listener tends to supply the missing notes, however, so that in some sense not striking a note at all is simply another variety of keyboard articulation, as effective and as characteristic of Monk as the three-note cluster near the end of this passage.

In the last chorus transcribed (actually, the solo goes on for two more choruses after this one) Monk tries out a new idea as spare as the one he started with, striking two notes at a time and then releasing one of them to create a pitch-bending effect. At this point he is using only his right hand, letting the bass sketch in the blues structure without adding any left-hand chords. And given the superb balance of the lead line, any left hand at all would have been superfluous.

Monk's repertoire also embraced a number of standard tunes, such as "Carolina Moon," "Smoke Gets In Your Eyes," and "April In Paris." We don't have space to transcribe them here, but they are worth listening to and studying in detail because of the way Monk altered and developed the material; in effect, he 'recomposed' practically every standard he played. In recomposition, a high degree of the personality of the artist permeates the subject matter, without destroying or obliterating the original. The 'recomposer' explores new horizons, not merely embellishing but using the structure of the tune to create something new. In film, Luis Buñuel, Carlos Suara, and Alfred Hitchcock are considered *auteurs.* They are more than innovators — their films possess a special recognizable style. Monk too possesses this quality of uniqueness. Although we recognize the old tunes when he plays them, they become in a musical sense his property.

There is much that can be learned from Monk, and much to emulate, even for musicians operating outside the straight-ahead jazz style. Among the greatest lessons he has to teach us are the ways in which he uses space — both intervallic space and temporal space. In two minutes or less, he can paraphrase a melody, lovingly or sarcastically altering the landscape by adding or subtracting a note or two, emphasizing an accent, allowing the silences a chance to breathe. Such minute but crucial transformations are close to the essence of Monk's music. On a broader scale, we can study how Monk developed the ingredients that were fresh and vital to him, how he assimilated and molded them into a new perspective, pruning away whatever was irrelevant, both in his improvisations and in his compositions. He created his own universe; and if we can't enter it completely, still we can share it with him for a while by listening to his recordings. There is only one Monk. ■

THELONIOUS MONK
A SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

As Solo Pianist or Leader:

Always Know (quartet & solo perfs., 1962-68), Columbia, JG-35270.
April Live In Paris (w. Rouse, Ore, & Dunlop, 1961); Milestone (dist. by Fantasy), 47060.
At The Five Spot (w. Griffin, Malik, & Haynes, 1958), Milestone, 47043.
Blue Monk, Prestige (dist. by Fantasy), 7848.
Brilliance (w. Rollins, Roach, Pettiford, others, 1956), Milestone, 47023.
Complete Genius (w. Sulieman, Blakey, Jackson, others, 1947-52), Blue Note (dist. by EMI-America), LWB-579.
Criss-Cross, Columbia Special Products, JCS-8838.
Five By Monk By Five, Riverside (dist. by Fantasy), 6086.
Genius Of Thelonious Monk, Prestige, 7656.
Golden Monk (1963-64), Prestige, 7508.
Greatest Hits, Columbia, CS-9775.
High Priest, Prestige, 7508.
In Action (w. Griffin, Haynes, others, 1958), Riverside, 6102.
In Person (w. big band, 1959, & sextet, 1960), Milestone, 47033.
It's Monk's Time (w. Rouse & others, 1964), Columbia, CS-8984.
Misterioso (w. Griffin, Haynes, others, 1958), Riverside, 6119.
Misterioso (1966), Columbia, CS-9216.
Memorial Album, Milestone, M-47064.
Monk/Trane (w. Coltrane, Ware, Wilson, 1957-58), Milestone, 47011.
Monk's Blues (w. big band, 1968), Columbia, CS-9806.
Monk's Dream, Columbia Special Products, JCS-8765.
Monk's Music (w. Coltrane, Hawkins, others), Gateway (dist. by Gemcom, 6570 Griffin Rd., Suite 106, Ft. Lauderdale, FL 33314), 7023.
Mulligan Meets Monk (w. Mulligan, Ware, Wilson, 1957), Riverside, 6107.
Piano Solos, Everest (2020 Ave. of the Stars, Concourse Level, Century City, CA 90067), 336.
Plays Duke Ellington (w. Pettiford, Clarke, 1955), Riverside, 6039.
Pure Monk (solo, 1954) DJM Ltd. (James House, 71-75 New Oxford St., London WC1A 1DP, England), DJSLM 2017.
Pure Monk (solo, 1955-59), Milestone, 47004.
Reflections, Vol. 1, Prestige, 7751.
Riverside Trios (combines *Plays Duke Ellington* & *Unique*), Milestone, 47052.
Solo (1964-65), Columbia, CS-9149.
Something In Blue (w. McKibbon, Blakey, 1971), Jazz Man (dist. by First American), 5019.
Straight, No Chaser (w. Rouse, others), Columbia, CS-9451.
Thelonious Himself (solo), Riverside, 6053M.
Thelonious Monk (solo, 1954), GNP Crescendo (8400 Sunset Blvd., Suite 603, Los Angeles, CA 90069), 9008.
Tribute To Monk & Bird, Tomato (611 Broadway, New York, NY 10012), 9002.
Underground (1967-68), Columbia, CS-9632.
Unique (w. Pettiford, Blakey, 1956), Riverside, 6068.

As Sideman

Art Blakey Jazz Messengers With Thelonious Monk, Atlantic, 1278.
Midnight At Minton's (w. Don Byas), Onyx (c/o Xanadu, 3242 Irwin Ave., Kingsbridge, NY 10463), 208.
Charlie Christian (at Minton's, 1941), Archive Of Folk & Jazz Music (dist. by Everest), 219.
Chronicle (w. Miles Davis), Prestige, 24096.
Miles & Monk At Newport, Columbia, PC-8978.
Signals (w. Gigi Gryce, Heath, Blakey, 1955), Savoy (342 Westminster Ave., Elizabeth, NJ 07208), 2231.
Harlem Odyssey (w. Joe Guy), Xanadu, 112.
Trumpet Battle At Minton's (w. Guy & Hot Lips Page), Xanadu, 107.
Bean & The Boys (w. Coleman Hawkins Quartet, 1944), Prestige, 7824.
After Hours In Harlem (w. Page), Onyx 207.
Sweets, Lips, & Lots Of Jazz (w. Page, Sweets Edison), Xanadu, 123.
Sonny Rollins (w. Chambers, Blakey, others, 1957), Blue Note, LT-81558.
Vintage Sessions (w. Rollins, others), Prestige, 24096.

Thanks to Dan Morgenstern for his assistance.